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# **“Are You Being Served?” Gendered Aesthetics Among Retail Workers**

**Stephen Walls**

**Durham University**

**School of Applied Social Sciences**

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**Thesis submitted as a partial requirement for the Degree of PhD**

**September 2007**

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## **Abstract**

This thesis explores the gendered nature of aesthetics within a particular service sector context – fashion retail. Attention focuses upon how gender structures the ‘aesthetic labour’ (Warhurst et al, 2000; Nickson et al 2001; Witz et al, 2003) of workers and in turn how aesthetics must be located within the wider sexual economy. This is achieved through incorporating the concept of aesthetic labour with the practice of ‘sexual service’ (Adkins, 1995). The notion of sexual service is expanded to adequately account for gendered variations. Adkins uses ‘sexual service’ to explain the labour of female employees but fails to recognise that men too perform sexual servicing. Through linking and extending these two concepts we are able to gain valuable insight into the gendered labour performances of both women *and* men and how gender, sexuality and other aspects of identity become part of the ‘product’ on offer in selling environments.

In addition to this I also examine the nature of ‘customer service’ within this setting and the way employees perceive customers as ‘powerful’, ‘pleasurable’ and ‘problems’. Literature elsewhere has argued that control and surveillance are extensive in particular service sector occupations. It is my aim here to explore the mechanisms for control and monitoring as they apply to retail workers in this environment and the potential for employees to develop strategies of resistance and form ‘tacit alliances’ (Mulholland, 2004).

Finally, this thesis aims to consider the extent to which aesthetic labour can become ‘mobile’ and move beyond the workplace and into other social spheres. This phenomenon is complex as various ‘hidden injuries’ (Sennett & Cobb, 1977) are inflicted upon workers and yet they manage to derive status, benefits and rewards as a result of their ‘extra labour’. The nature of these ‘hidden injuries’ and the abilities for workers to capitalise upon the ‘mobility’ of their labour also provide the focus for investigation here.

Using ethnographic data and existing research this thesis argues that gender remains a crucial component in structuring the experiences of service workers in the contemporary service industry and underlines the need for continued investigation into the social relations of service work.

## **Declaration**

Declaration:

None of the material contained in the thesis has previously been submitted for a degree in the University of Durham or any other university. None of the material contained in the thesis is based on joint research.

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

*Fashions are the only induced epidemics, proving that epidemics can be induced by tradesmen* - George Bernard Shaw

*If you are not in fashion, you are nobody* - Lord Chesterfield

The retail sector has suffered serious neglect from the social sciences. Where retail is explored, it is usually the experience of consumption on the part of customers that is documented (Featherstone, 1991; Shilling, 1993, Lury, 1996). The work of sales assistants and managers in providing the service for consumption seems to be ignored (although we can excavate gems from Whyte, 1948, Wright-Mills, 1951 and Porter-Benson, 1988). More recently, authors have begun to show an interest in retail and to underline its importance in constituting individuals, identities and social relations (DuGay, 1996; Hughes and Tadic, 1998; Pettinger, 2004; 2005a; 2005b; 2006).

My own interest in retail stems from working as a sales assistant for two years. During this time I witnessed and experienced situations and encounters that triggered my sociological interest. I was surprised at how far my colleagues and I had to sell not only garments, but also ourselves to customers. It became apparent early on that to be a good salesman required both a decent amount of product knowledge and also being able to establish rapport with customers quickly. This could not be done haphazardly but instead involved a great deal of skill and manipulation. Many of the social conventions governing interaction





between strangers (i.e. 'civil inattention', Goffman, 1959; 1963) were irrelevant or a hindrance in this situation. Instead, we had to engage in performances of familiarity, friendliness and seduction in the pursuit of sales targets. I noticed these performances were scripted by wider social structures as male and female workers performed in both similar and different ways. Workers were required to sell their gendered and sexualised identities.

In addition to this, I also found other aspects of workers' identities were essential job requirements and exchangeable commodities. Perhaps because of my own investment in higher education I was shocked at how much sales assistants in fashion retail were selected on the basis of looks, fashion style and their personality. It was vital for these workers to be 'trendy', good-looking, 'smart' and outgoing rather than have qualifications or experience. In this way, it was their aesthetic capital that was the crucial factor affecting employment opportunities. Not only was this aesthetic capital important to individuals' job prospects, but it was also vital to their credibility as fashionable people. This was important because it directly influenced the production of the store aesthetic in general and also the productivity of workers in particular. Being 'trendy' becomes an exchangeable commodity as customers see workers as fashionable or 'in-the-know'. This had an impact upon customers' purchase decisions and also encouraged repeat business.

Finally, I was also interested to investigate how far work is able to transcend the workplace as I found myself and colleagues to be the focus of attention from customers outside of work. It seemed that whenever my workmates and I went

out drinking, someone would always recognise and approach us. When these situations presented themselves they required further labour on our part as we found ourselves trapped by the doctrine of 'customer service' and left with no option but to humour customers as they initiated conversations and interrupted our leisure time. However, the status attached to working for a particular shop was something which also brought its own benefits. I wanted to explore how far this happened across stores, whether it was influenced by gender and how workers dealt with these situations.

All of these issues pointed to retail as a rich and fruitful research project and influenced the focus, design and direction of this research. Although approaches to theorising service work are increasing in their sophistication, they need to be continually developed to keep pace with the rapidly changing and highly contextual retail sector, the service sector in general and wider social factors influencing the employment market. As research into service work has proliferated, a number of theories and concepts have emerged to explore and account for the experiences of those employed in this sector. These range from 'emotional labour' (Hochschild, 1983), 'sexual service' (Adkins, 1995), 'organisation sexuality' (Hearn and Parkin, 1987), 'enterprising selves' (DuGay, 1996), 'customer-oriented bureaucracy' (Korczynski, 2001) and 'aesthetic labour' (Warhurst et al, 2000; Nickson et al 2001; Witz et al 2003).

The concepts that held the most salience for this research project were those of 'emotional labour', 'sexual service' and 'aesthetic labour' because of their focus on the commodification of workers' identities, dispositions and corporeal

attributes in the labour process. The concept of 'sexual service' is useful as an analytical tool and is flexible enough to be adapted to the concepts of emotional or aesthetic labour. However, despite sharing some similarities, the concepts of emotional and aesthetic labour are epistemologically distinct. Therefore the greatest question that I faced regarded which epistemological framework to adopt. Emotional labour remains a central underpinning of many research epistemologies in this field, however, the concept of aesthetic labour points towards a re-working of Hochschild's ideas. The following section is a theoretical exploration of the concepts of emotional and aesthetic labour and will elaborate the standpoint that I chose to adopt.

### **Emotional and aesthetic labour – exploring concepts**

The work of those employed within the service industry, and particularly that of 'front-line' workers was neglected within sociology until the groundbreaking research of Hochschild (1983) landed upon the academic runway. In *The Managed Heart*, Hochschild analysed the emotional demands placed upon flight attendants and coined the terms 'emotion work' and 'emotional labour' to describe the processes involved in the social exchange of feelings. Critics highlight the contradictions in her work, overemphasis on particular aspects in order to prove her thesis, the simplicity and starkness of her formulations and notions that lead to a one dimensional account and her overall lack of theoretical rigour (Wouters, 1989; Bolton & Boyd, 2003). However, many authors recognise the value of Hochschild's work, mounting a formidable defence and reformulating particular aspects of it (e.g. Williams, 2003; Taylor and Tyler, 2000).

### ***'Flying by the seat of her pants' – Hochschild and her critics***

The work of Hochschild broke the mould in relation to the study of work and emotions. Throwing light upon a highly neglected area, Hochschild's research remains influential when looking at service labour today. Hochschild distinguishes between 'emotion work' and 'emotional labour' suggesting that we all transform emotions and perform a degree of surface acting in our private lives. However, this 'work' becomes 'labour' when it becomes a resource to be exchanged in the labour market. The term she applies to this process is the 'transmutation' of the 'private emotional system'. By transmutation, Hochschild is referring to how 'private ways of managing feeling become controlled by organizations' (1983: 19). Hochschild identifies three characteristics that define emotional labour jobs: firstly, they involve face-to-face or voice-to-voice interaction with the public; secondly, the worker must attempt to produce a certain emotional state in customers/clients; finally, employers supervise the emotional labour of workers through various methods of surveillance.

Central to her analysis are the notions of 'surface' and 'deep' acting, 'feeling rules', 'gift exchange' and alienation. These rest on a particular formulation of self and Hochschild's own model of emotion that is glued, pinned and pieced together using existing theories from Freud, Darwin and Symbolic Interaction. To understand her overall analysis, we need to consider Hochschild's concept of the self and how she views emotions. The picture of the self painted in Hochschild's work appears as something with a fundamental truth. There is an essential, coherent, stable and fixed self evident in her work. We may be able to

produce 'false' emotions and convince ourselves we feel something we do not, but underlying this is an 'authentic self' and an irreducible 'truth'. Of course, there are problems with such perceptions of selfhood, as some theorists suggest identities can be fundamentally unstable, incoherent and mobile (Crang, 1997), 'hyperreal' (Baudrillard, 1983) or the product of discourse (Foucault, 1976; 1984a; 1984b).

'Deep' and 'surface' acting are also central to Hochschild's work. She maintains the performance metaphor claiming that both forms of acting are created and sustained through a carefully managed stage-setting in the workplace and the use of 'props'. For Hochschild, surface acting is the ability to produce/maintain an outward display of feeling/emotion while hiding 'true' feelings, whereas 'deep' acting involves self-inducing emotions or actively changing feelings to fit a certain situation. Both deep and surface acting form the lynchpins of Hochschild's formulations of alienation and the costs involved when emotions are exchanged in the labour market. Inability to maintain either forms of acting when under pressure had damaging potential for the worker: when the transmutation fails, a flight attendant risks becoming alienated from the 'signal function of display' and conversely when the transmutation works they risk becoming alienated from the 'signal function of feeling' (Hochschild, 1983).

The whole process of emotional labour involves an inherent inequality in what Hochschild identifies as 'feeling rules' and emotional 'gift exchange'. She underlines that both feeling rules and emotional gift exchange operate in the everyday lives of social actors and that inequality can be built into private

relationships (i.e. within families, and especially so in the way women are conventionally viewed as carers). However, Hochschild is keen to point out how feeling rules and emotional gift exchanges are *characteristically* unequal when workers perform emotional labour. The worker is always subordinate to the customer or client and both parties recognise this: 'where the customer is king unequal exchanges are normal, and from the beginning customer and client assume different rights to feeling and display (Hochschild, 1983: 84).'

Customers can become angry, disappointed and disillusioned when they feel they have not received enough 'emotional dues'.

Hochschild also touches upon the relationship between class and emotional labour. She identifies that employers typically look towards recruiting, developing and cultivating a particular middle class sociability. In addition, Hochschild draws upon research into class-specific child-rearing practices. She claims that working class parents are more likely to control children by applying sanctions to behaviour whereas middle class parents are much more likely to prepare children 'to be governed more by rules that apply to feelings' (1983: 156). Accepting that there may be exceptions to this, Hochschild retreats from attributing general differences in child-rearing practices to social class, instead arguing that parental occupation is instrumental in child development. The key factor for her is whether parents are employed in occupations which require emotional labour. This she suggests is supplemented by other social factors such as schools that foster the development of autonomous, emotionally controlled individuals and the prominence of service sector employment in local economies.

However, Hochschild's work does not navigate the theoretical 'airspace' without experiencing turbulence. Various aspects of her work have been attacked for being oversimplified, overemphasised and contradictory. The volume of criticism is so dense that I will underline the three main areas where other authors have found Hochschild's work problematic. These include: the distinction she draws between public/private, real/false and her lack of clarity regarding the position of emotional labour within these categories; her overemphasis and skewed conception of 'costs' and failure to recognise worker's positive experiences of emotional labour; and her lack of attention to employee resistance.

Critics highlight that the dichotomies between real and false, public and private that Hochschild uses are theoretically naïve, overemphasised and that she uses the two interchangeably (Wouters, 1989; Bolton & Boyd, 2003). Wouters claims that public and private exist on a continuum not as a dichotomy. Furthermore, Hochschild states that emotion work is likely to be the strongest in the deepest personal relationships. This creates a contradiction in her work whereby she implicitly admits that 'in private life the management of emotions also happens according to standardized social forms, thereby muddling the public/private distinction' (Wouters, 1989: 99). In addition, Wouters proposes that Hochschild falls into the trap of postulating the public/private distinction as a recent development. Emotion management, Wouters suggests, was never only a private act and feeling rules have always been negotiated both in public and private (Wouters, 1989).

The concept of transmutation is also heavily criticized. Hochschild uses the term to illustrate the process whereby private emotional systems are employed in the workplace. However, she later suggests that child-rearing practices are affected by the occupation of parents: 'big emotion workers tend to raise little ones' (1983: 156). This highlights the problems inherent in her distinction between public and private as the direction of the transmutation is reversed (Wouters, 1989). In addition, this problematises the notion of a 'real' self in the 'private' domain as the 'public' arena of work and occupations influences the emotional systems and forms of self-regulation we become accustomed to through childhood (Wouters, 1989).

Moreover, Hochschild suggests that workers must learn to use feelings in an instrumental way, but this falls flat when she claims middle class children learn to make feelings a resource in the home and that potential employees are selected on the basis of possessing a certain middle class sociability (Wouters, 1989). For Wouters, this failing is reinforced when we look at Hochschild's theory of emotions and how she neglects to consider learned, internalized controls of emotions in any depth. In Hochschild's theory of emotions, regulation of feeling appears to be exerted on the individual from an outside source which is seen as inherently oppressive, thus not taking into account that people do have impulses, counter-impulses and self-regulate feelings (Wouters, 1989). Similarly, Wouters takes issue with the way Hochschild castigates the civilizing of emotions as oppressive and her ideas that unmanaged, spontaneous feelings are positive. Instead, Wouters points to how the social regulation of



feelings is vital for the functioning of society (an idea Hochschild notes but fails to give adequate exploration) and the fact that only certain forms of spontaneous, unmanaged feelings are valued i.e. non-violent and non-hostile.

At a conceptual level, Wouters claims that Hochschild's definition of emotional labour limits consideration of the demands placed upon people who supervise their own emotion work. Generally, Wouters claims, jobs which require workers to monitor their own emotional labour place huge demands on people in these occupations (i.e. doctors, lawyers etc). However, Wouters suggests that Hochschild ignores this particular type of work because applying her theory of 'costs' is inadequate for this group of workers. Decent income and reputation might negate the appearance of 'exploitation' and the 'costs' involved in such work. Therefore the analysis of emotional labour involved in Hochschild's research was only ever applicable to forms of work that sit comfortably with her notions of 'costs' and 'compensation' (Wouters, 1989).

Furthermore, it has been argued that the emphasis she places upon costs leads Hochschild into a partial and moralistic interpretation. Through this she denies any room for individuals to actually enjoy the work involved and gain a sense of meaning through establishing relationships with members of the general public (Wouters, 1989; Wharton, 1993; Korczynski *et al*, 2000; Bolton & Boyd, 2003). In response to Hochschild's account, authors underline the positive aspects of emotional labour and the mechanisms through which employees create forms of resistance. These authors highlight the importance of humour, commitment to

colleagues and a genuine caring disposition in maintaining work as an enjoyable experience.

Wouters goes on to suggest that the civilizing of emotions has actually opened up spaces for variation and resistance. Within the process of the civilizing of emotions Wouters argues that the rules of feeling and display are less rigid now. Emotional exchange between individuals is more 'variable, escapable and open for idiosyncratic nuances' (1989: 105). Although Wouters agrees with Hochschild that social constraints governing self-regulation and demands on emotion management have intensified, Wouters sees this as carving out possibilities for increases in behavioural and emotional alternatives.

Accompanying this development, Wouters claims that more recently individuals have become much more skilled in their emotion management and that we cannot simply cast emotional labourers as entirely passive dupes. Other authors concur with this arguing that employees are able to clearly identify the façade they create in the workplace and their own personal feelings and emotions (Taylor, 1998; Bolton & Boyd, 2003). Workers are thus able to remain aware when dealing with difficult customers that they are offering an 'empty performance' without ever 'buying into' the norms set by the company (Bolton & Boyd, 2003: 301). Similarly, research suggests that Hochschild seriously neglects the potential for unmanaged spaces in the workplace where employees can challenge organisational norms and misbehave (Bolton & Boyd, 2003; Mulholland, 2004).

Although many of these criticisms are valid, I think some have misunderstood Hochschild's aims and that others themselves fail to consider the wider social context of emotional labour. I would also like to emphasise caution when looking towards aspects of resistance and pleasure in emotional labour professions.

Although I understand the point Wouters is trying to make regarding Hochschild's overemphasis on 'costs', I think the message she was attempting to convey has been lost in this critique. Part of what Hochschild is saying is that emotional labour needs to be recognised and she advocates increased remuneration in jobs which require that labour. The fact remains that the emotional labour involved in the occupations Wouters highlights as excluded *do* have more status and higher incomes than those Hochschild incorporates in her scheme. In addition, Wouters loses sight of the highly gendered nature of emotional labour and the fact that female labour (both paid and unpaid) has traditionally been undervalued. So although Wouters is claiming that Hochschild excludes particular workers on the basis of 'costs', comparing emotional labour in highly paid (male-dominated) professions with that performed by those in lower income (predominantly female) occupations is theoretically naïve.

In answer to those who underline the neglect of pleasure and enjoyment in emotional labour jobs, we must be cautious about tipping the scales in the other direction and thus overemphasising the pleasure or lack of costs. For example, Wouters states that Hochschild's analysis 'makes her see costs where there are none or hardly any' (1989: 118). To make such a suggestion is problematic.

Yes, people can enjoy work, but to claim there are no costs at all not only contradicts the argument made earlier by Wouters regarding the costs of self-regulating emotional labour in higher status occupations, but also appears theoretically blind to the stress and exhaustion experienced by having to maintain an emotional performance. While I agree that there is more room for employees to manoeuvre than is presented in Hochschild's research, the scope for resistance is limited. The façade still has to be maintained. Kitchens, staff rooms and galleys and other 'backstage' areas can be 'unmanaged spaces' but they are always hidden from the view of customers. Similarly, misbehaviour and imperfect customer service can only be performed in covert ways without threat of sanction. This also challenges the extent to which employee performance is linked more towards commitment to colleagues rather than organisations. Although Bolton & Boyd (2003) may be accurate in characterising relations among workers in terms of solidarity and camaraderie I remain sceptical over the extent that these relations are more influential than loss of earnings and management sanction in maintaining low sickness rates among staff.

Also we cannot lose sight of the fact that although people may be 'multi-skilled' emotion managers (Bolton & Boyd, 2003), stress and other 'costs' are still a factor. Employees in customer service jobs routinely face sexual harassment and the threat of physical violence (Adkins, 1995; Folgero & Fjeldstad, 1995; Hughes & Tadic, 1998; Guerrier & Adib, 2000; Williams, 2003). Emotional labourers may be able to deal with sexual harassment and diffuse a potentially volatile situation with tremendous skill but this does not mean employees find such situations unproblematic or non-threatening.

In terms of the dichotomy between real and false, some authors have suggested that workers can create and maintain 'multiple selves' and to some extent 'play' with their identities (McDowell, 1995; Crang, 1997; Bolton & Boyd, 2003). However, the ability of all workers to enjoy such a playful position towards identities is restricted. This is something that Crang (1997) picks up on in his notion of 'ascribed' characteristics, but which is also dealt with by Adkins & Lury (1999) and Adkins (2000). Some individuals cannot play with their identities as they can never escape 'categories of immanence' which locate them in the social landscape (Adkins, 2000).

The work of Hochschild was an important development in researching service work. However, her overall framework appears to be fraught with difficulties. Some researchers have sought to develop the concept of emotional labour in relation to other service professions and their work will be drawn upon in the literature review chapter. However, in exploring relevant concepts for this research I wish to now turn to the notion of 'aesthetic labour' and how this has been a major influence on my epistemological position.

### ***Moving beyond 'emotional labour'***

Much more recently, the notion of 'aesthetic labour' has been developed in order to incorporate embodiment into the way we analyse various aspects of recruitment, training and work in particular service organisations. Although some authors appear to have flirted with ideas of aesthetics in service occupations (e.g. Crang, 1997; Adkins, 1995; 2000; Taylor and Tyler, 1998;

2000; Korczynski *et al* 2000) none have really developed a conceptual tool adequate for exploring aesthetics. However, the light among the theoretical shadows is found in the work of Nickson, Warhurst, Witz and Cullen (2000; 2001; 2003) and their concept of 'aesthetic labour'. Such ideas are valuable when looking at service labour because they underline further ways organisations can 'mobilise, develop and commodify' aspects of workers selves (Witz *et al*, 2003). However, further exploration is needed in order to analyse how aesthetic labour performances are gendered and their potential for 'escaping' the workplace setting. The concept of aesthetic labour needs to be located more firmly within the wider sexual economy but also within local cultural economies of status and exchange.

As outlined earlier, educational qualifications carry little currency in fashion retail. Instead employers sought workers that looked and dressed in line with the image of the store or had previous customer service (and therefore aesthetic labour) experience in a similar role. Aesthetic capital trumps educational capital in fashion retail, particularly for 'lower-level' frontline workers such as sales assistants. A variety of authors in the field of service work research have touched upon the notion of aesthetics and corporeality (Crang, 1997; Taylor & Tyler, 1998; 2000; Adkins, 2000; Korczynski *et al*, 2000; Williams, 2003). However, none of these authors explore the issues in any depth or develop an adequate conceptualization of the interplay between aesthetics and service labour.

The work of Nickson *et al* (2000; 2001; 2003) takes up the theoretical baton recognising the importance of the concept of emotional labour but, at the same time underlining the need for greater emphasis on the corporeal aspects of service labour. They develop the notion of 'aesthetic labour' to incorporate embodied aspects of service labour in all stages of recruitment, training and labour itself. They do so by combining elements of staged and scripted performance from the work of Goffman (1959, 1967, 1971) with the notions of physical capital, habitus and dispositions developed by Bourdieu (1984, 1990). They underline the importance of aesthetics for organisations by identifying three key aspects of the interplay between them: aesthetics *of* organisation; aesthetics *in* organisation and aesthetics *as* organisation. Increasingly they argue, in certain organisations, employees are becoming seen as 'animate components' of the corporate aesthetic. These authors argue that emotional labour prioritises the 'mindful and feelingful' self over the embodied self. Subsequently, the concept creates and relies upon artificial dichotomies between 'surface' and 'depth', 'real' and 'false'. Furthermore, Nickson *et al* argue that Hochschild incorrectly equates surface with artificiality and depth with reality thus losing sight of the importance of bodily display in favour of emotions and feelings.

The authors who developed the concept elaborate that aesthetic labour can be defined as:

*A supply of embodied capacities and attributes through processes of recruitment, selection and training, transforming them into 'competencies'*

*and 'skills' which are then aesthetically geared towards producing a 'style' of service encounter deliberately intended to appeal to the senses of customers, most obviously in a visual or aural way. Although analytically more complex, 'looking good' or 'sounding right are the most overt manifestations of aesthetic labour. In essence, then, with aesthetic labour employers are seeking employees who can portray the company's image through their work, and at the same time appeal to the senses of the customer for those firms' commercial benefit. (Nickson, et al, 2001: 170)*

Aesthetic labour, Nickson et al claim is not a recent development, but has become increasingly evident in particular 'style' labour markets. The physical capital and dispositions of workers are 'mobilised, developed and commodified' by the organization and become part of the product being sold (Witz et al, 2003). Although the concept of aesthetic labour may not be applicable to all areas of the service sector, it is particularly salient in areas where selling and market image is vital e.g. parts of the tourist industry and designer retailers. In these settings, Nickson *et al* claim that all workers must fall into line with the organizational aesthetic which informs all aspects of recruitment and training. In this way, they argue that the physical capital and dispositions of workers become exchangeable in the labour market.

However, the gendered elements of physical capital and dispositions are left unexplored in the concept of aesthetic labour. Literature has examined how female workers are objectified and the importance of appearance for women



workers (Adkins, 1995, Tyler and Abbott, 1998), but what about male workers in occupations that require aesthetic labour? Is aesthetic labour available as a resource for men when attempting to gain employment and bargaining over pay and conditions? Are there any differences or similarities in the way men and women perform aesthetic labour? Do men find performing aesthetic labour in female-dominated occupations problematic? We need to address these issues in order to refine the concept for understanding the continuing gendered nature of economic relations in the labour market. If we can illustrate that men and women can exchange their aesthetic capital we can challenge those who claim that women's sexual labour is appropriated in a way that men's is not. If the exchange value of physical capital and dispositions are important for men as well as women then this could indicate men's sexual attractiveness and stylised dispositions are labour market resources. This is important to explore how men and women are positioned within the contemporary service labour market and the extent to which their aesthetic labour performances are gendered and sexualised. This can be achieved through greater incorporation of Adkins work on 'sexual servicing' (Adkins, 1995). In this research Adkins found that female workers were sexually commodified in a way that their male colleagues were not. Female workers' sexuality was sold as part of the product on offer. However, my own experiences suggested that women are not alone in this and that men similarly sell their gendered and sexualised identities as part of a commodity exchange.

Similarly, we need to recognise that aesthetic labour need not be limited to explaining workplace relations but can instead be applied to relations and

practices that extend beyond the workplace. So, to what extent does aesthetic labour 'escape' the workplace? The work involved in maintaining aesthetic capital requires labour and resources. These are often performed outside of work and during workers' own free time. In addition, aesthetic labour performances can 'escape' the workplace when encounters between customers and employees occur during workers' leisure time. How often do these encounters occur and in what context? How influential are store aesthetics and brand strategies upon the commonality of these situations? Can we incorporate and adapt the concept of 'sexual servicing' as a practice within the notion of aesthetic labour? And if so, does this help to locate the gendered and sexualised aesthetic labour performances of workers both in the workplace and outside of it, within wider sexual and labour market economies?

Such questions formed the basis of my initial research proposal and informed the overall research design as I wanted to consider these issues in depth, and also explore how workers perceived and interpreted their own experiences. I wanted to see first-hand, how workers interacted with customers on the shopfloor and how they constructed customers in their own eyes. These desires were a major factor in determining the character of the research and in leading me towards a qualitative approach.

## **Methodology**

A great deal of research appears to be born from researchers' own experiences. Certainly this is evident in some of the open admissions of researchers in the field of service work (Pettinger, 2004; Brannan, 2005). I am

no different. Perhaps because we have seen so much that warrants investigation, or perhaps because we can gain privileged access, we choose to take advantage of our experiences and contacts, developing in-depth qualitative research projects aimed at producing rich and earthy accounts. At the time of drafting the initial research proposal I was surprised at how little attention male service workers had received within the field of employment research. Similarly, there was very little research examining retail and 'consumption workers', even though consumption itself has been a popular avenue of interest for researchers and academics in the field of cultural change (Douglas and Isherwood, 1979; Miller, 1987; 1997; Featherstone, 1991) and lifestyles (Chaney, 1996).

It was with these factors in mind that I thought an in-depth, ethnographic (or 'microethnographic'<sup>1</sup> research project would be a valuable contribution to research on employment, retail, gender, identity and fashion. The research was essentially ethnographic, involving semi-structured interviews and participant observation, and incorporated other forms of data (e.g. document and internet research). The following sections elaborate upon why I chose qualitative methods and specifically, semi-structured interviews and participant observation.

Although some researchers (e.g. Bulan *et al*, 1997, Rafaeli and Sutton, 1989; Wharton, 1993) have employed quantitative techniques for exploring service work, the majority of research in this area and related fields conventionally uses qualitative research techniques or some form of mixed methods approach. Adopting a qualitative methodology seemed natural given the scope of the

investigation, my history as a retail employee and my relationships with co-workers. Qualitative techniques also provided a means through which to take advantage of my privileged access and contacts while emphasizing the contextual nature of findings.

A number of characteristics of qualitative approaches informed my decision to adopt this approach. First of all, qualitative research involves 'seeing through the eyes of those studied' (Bryman, 2001: 277). According to qualitative approaches, social life needs to be understood in terms of how actors view their own actions and attribute their own meanings to events and experiences. This is important to maintain accuracy. Although as Becker (1996) notes, any research inevitably involves the 'production' of accounts by the researcher, the risk of imposing researcher perspective is reduced if we record and analyse the actions, reasons and motives of those involved in the research through their own accounts. Similarly, advocates of participant observation suggest that this method or 'technique' is vital for understanding the actions, context and social world of those under investigation:

*... by subjecting yourself, your own body and your own personality, and your own social situation to the set of contingencies that play upon a set of individuals...you can physically and ecologically penetrate their circle...so that you are close to them while they are responding to what life does to them...to pick up on their minor grunts and groans as they respond to their situation...the standard technique is to try to subject yourself, hopefully, to their life circumstances...although...you can leave*

*at any time, you act as if you can't and you try to accept all of the desirable and undesirable things that are a feature of their life...with your "tuned-up" body and with the ecological right to be close to them (which you've obtained by one sneaky means or another), you are in a position to note their gestural, visual, bodily response to what's going on around them and you're empathetic enough – because you've been taking the same crap they've been taking – to sense what it is they're responding to.* (Goffman, 1989: 125-6)

This has particular salience in this research because of my history as a sales assistant. As a co-worker, I was able to see things from the point of view of a sales assistant as well as a researcher. However, this also had the potential to greatly influence my data and explanations. Critics of qualitative research often refer to the dangers of 'going native' and becoming too immersed in the setting. Although I accept the inevitability of such criticism, honest and explicit reference to my relationships with those involved increases 'strong objectivity' in the research (Harding, 1987; 1993). In fact, accepting that my interpretations will be influenced by my background and relationships can actually enhance the objectivity of my research (Harding, 1993; Becker, 1996). In this way I was careful to negotiate the meanings that the participants attached to their actions rather than imposing my own views upon them.

However, one concern that I did have relates to viewing the world through the eyes of people with different 'ascribed characteristics' (Crang, 1997) and particularly as a male researcher exploring the labour of female workers (Taylor,

1998). This further influenced my decision to explore the subjective experiences of workers as well as my own observations. Interviews held were therefore deliberately open to encourage interviewees to elaborate upon their own meanings and experiences and reduce any researcher bias. In this way the responses of participants were not informed by my own perspective of events or situations, but formulated according to how they perceived them. However, Taylor (1998) identifies problems over acknowledging emotion work. He points to the difficulties in identifying when another person is performing emotional labour and the fact that individuals may not recognise when they perform emotional labour. These difficulties informed the structuring of the interviews and data analysis in an attempt to illuminate participant's views in conjunction with my own.

In addition to revealing the perceptions of workers themselves, Bryman points out how qualitative research emphasizes context and description. Such emphasis is placed upon detailed accounts in order to emphasise the importance of contextualising research. Bryman suggests that one of the main reasons for emphasising 'thick description' (Geertz, 1974) or, even 'broad description' (Becker, 1996) is that this detail 'provides the mapping of context in terms of which behaviour is understood' (2001: 279). The service industry is extremely diverse and there exists great variation within retail itself. In-depth, contextual research is able to uncover the differences and similarities between retailers according to target market, market share, regional and stylized variations as well as global location.

Claims for generalisation are often the source of debate around qualitative methodologies, particularly those incorporating ethnography. However, the aim of much ethnographic work is not generalisation but the intricacies and contextual character of a particular case. The ethnographic character of this research enables the findings to be located within a local context and the local cultural economies that were apparent. However, Hammersley and Atkinson (1995) note that generalisation is possible from ethnographic research and that a variety of strategies can be employed to deal with this 'problem'. Strategic selection of cases is a key factor in enhancing claims to generalisation. Accordingly I have used a form of 'theoretical sampling' (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) to explore my research questions across comparable but contrasting retailers. Glaser and Strauss (1967) argue that cases should be selected to 'produce as many categories and properties of categories as possible and to relate categories to one another' (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995: 42). It is also possible to test the 'typicality' of the cases involved in research by comparing them with other similar cases. This was highly influential selecting the retailers that formed my sample.

Another reason that I chose a qualitative methodology was the flexibility that such an approach affords. Bryman (2001) highlights this flexibility. He underlines how the general rather than specific nature of qualitative research questions increases the scope for uncovering and exploring issues that researchers may have neglected. This allows for new areas of investigation to open up and enables researchers to follow alternative avenues of enquiry. Adopting this approach enhanced the ability to question my own assumptions

about the environment and behaviour of research participants. This also enabled participants to inform the research itself and to highlight areas I had ignored or neglected. Importantly, this kind of approach also allows for flexibility in researching 'settings' rather than focusing too narrowly upon one particular field. Hammersley and Atkinson (1995) suggest that

*settings are not naturally occurring phenomena, they are constituted and maintained through cultural definition and social strategies. Their boundaries are not fixed but shift across occasions, to one degree or another, through processes of redefinition and negotiation. (1995: 41)*

This was important considering I wanted to explore how far labour moved between spheres and across settings. This was a key aspect of the research and one that was certainly facilitated through adopting a qualitative methodology. Overall, I chose to adopt a qualitative approach because reflexivity and locating myself within the research was crucial alongside the emphasis placed upon the highly contextual nature of this research.

## **Method**

The method I adopted was largely a result of my access to specific gatekeepers and contacts within the local area. A number of potential cases were explored using my contacts to negotiate access to various fashion retailers. Following a period of negotiation with informal contacts and the managers of various retailers, seven shops formed the basis of the initial sample. This was based on the level of access that they would give me and negotiations about my presence



in the setting. Finally, three retailers, 'Mojo', 'Croft' and 'Legend'<sup>2</sup> were chosen on the basis of their contrasting and comparable characteristics. This was informed, as mentioned earlier, by wanting to follow a 'theoretical sampling' framework and achieve a cross-section of shops with which to focus given the scope of the project. As all of the shops employed both male and female workers, the key variables that directed my sampling included store aesthetics (based around target market, store image and the aesthetic labour of staff), approaches to selling and customer service ethics (measured through focus on achieving targets and emphasis on customer service) and also the retailer's position within the market (measured in terms of local, national or international scale). Consequently the findings presented here are inherently localised but can also be applied on a wider scale as 'Croft' extended its reach globally and 'Legend' did likewise nationally. Although 'Mojo' exists as an independent retailer, it formed part of a larger company which incorporated similar shops across the region. Similarly, 'Mojo' sat alongside a number of competitors that sold the same fashion labels and garments and exhibited similar characteristics in terms of approaches to selling and store aesthetics. Many of these competitors remain localised, but they also extend nationally.

The fieldwork itself consisted of a six month period of participant observation from October 2004 through to the end of March 2005 and semi-structured interviews with the three store managers and 26 sales assistants (15 male, 11 female: 5 men from each store, 3 women from 'Legend', 4 women each from 'Mojo' and 'Croft') randomly selected from a list of employees willing to be interviewed. Fieldnotes were made in a journal and using other scraps of paper

that I could lay my hands on when situations arose and workers made comments that I wanted to record. Other forms of data were also used: staff training manuals, company leaflets, paperwork and memos. Furthermore, other data such as promotional material from local clubs, bars etc. and information obtained from company websites and advertising was also used.

### ***Participant observation and interviews***

During the fieldwork period, four weeks were assigned to each store for intensive participant observation. Initially I also spent a number of days in each of my chosen stores to ensure they would be suitable for research, negotiate access and conditions, but also to gather preliminary data on recruitment and the labour process in each store.

I chose to approach the fieldwork in stages in order to adjust to each individual setting, but also to allow the staff to adjust to me and build up some level of trust and familiarity. Consequently the research was staged in a particular way in an attempt to isolate the investigation of each store before moving onto the next. The first stage of the research was focused on preliminary investigation of each retailer. This took place in October 2004, during the first month of fieldwork. I used this period to assess exactly how much 'access' each store would allow, to negotiate my role within the setting, discuss practical issues such as health and safety, arrange 'zero-hour' contracts for myself ('Mojo' insisted on this for insurance purposes and consequently 'Legend' and 'Croft' followed suit to be 'on the safe side'), and also to research the recruitment of seasonal and permanent staff. During this period I also decided to try and

prove myself as a capable sales assistant by working a couple of 'trial' shifts in order to increase my bargaining power with managers and to reassure them I would not cause distraction or disrupt the work of employees.

After a promising start to the research I chose to focus on 'Mojo' first. The rationale for this was based upon the fact I had the most pre-existing relationships with the management/staff there and wanted to resolve any research issues or problems that arose in an environment where the staff would be more sympathetic to my aims and objectives. Following that I decided to focus on 'Croft' in the January, with 'Legend' finally in the February. Ordering the fieldwork in this way would then allow me to build relations with the managers and sales teams in the other two stores before entering those settings for the focused participant observation and interviews. The December was set aside for finishing interviews with 'Mojo' employees but also for covering shifts and 'helping out' at all three retailers during the busy Christmas period. This was part of the agreement made between myself and all three stores in exchange for their participation in the research.

During this element of the fieldwork, I performed many of the duties of a sales assistant. This mainly involved tidying and folding clothes and cleaning the shelves and sweeping the shopfloor. However, I did help out serving customers occasionally as this was part of my agreement with the stores - they would let me observe and interview staff in exchange for helping from time to time. This arrangement also involved covering shifts where possible if the stores were short-staffed over the six month fieldwork period. Although this resulted in a

hectic and exhausting schedule it appeared to be a key bargaining tool when it came to negotiating and maintaining access to the setting. Acting as a 'reserve' worker was one of my main resources for negotiating access to the settings but also to help incorporate myself into the environment and get closer to the 'action'. It was also intended as a way to gain the trust of my 'co-workers' and as a gesture on my part to give something back to the management and staff for agreeing to be part of the research project. Working alongside the staff at each site over a prolonged period (albeit through intermittent shifts) as well as spending an entire month there helped me to establish relatively close relationships and played a massive part in promoting open and honest responses to the questions I asked. In particular, the staff were very forthcoming with their accounts because we often shared a point of reference. As the fieldwork progressed they would often respond to questions by referring to an event or experience we had shared on the shopfloor such as 'remember the other day when "x" happened...that made me feel...etc.' However, this 'arrangement' to cover shifts was taken full advantage of by management. Covering staff hours in this way led to a certain level of research 'overlap' across the stores. Despite efforts to maintain a neat and clear sequencing of observation and interviews, the fieldwork itself became quite 'messy'. Rather than having distinct and separate periods where I would focus on one store, I found myself spending more time overall in the stores than initially intended and covering shifts across the three stores (and observing while doing so) during observation/interview periods for others. Rather than spending the intended four weeks with each retailer as well as a number of days of preliminary negotiations and 'cover', in total I spent 40 days at 'Mojo'; 39 days at 'Croft' and

35 days at 'Legend'<sup>3</sup>. Although this agreement to cover shifts disrupted my neatly planned timetable and also proved exhausting (sometimes working six days a week as well as transcribing data at home around work/research hours) I think it had a positive impact on the research overall and the kind of data I was able to generate

All of the staff were made aware of my role as a researcher and the aims of my research. Customers were not informed of my reason for being there because the research setting was a public place, it would have seriously affected customer behaviour and could have been economically damaging for the individual stores and employees. Fieldnotes were recorded during the participant observation period with relative ease. I was able to make notes fairly inconspicuously as sales assistants in two of the stores had sales books. In the third store I was able to make notes in the fitting rooms or behind the cash desk during quiet periods<sup>4</sup>. The account that follows is based upon observations made during research and the accounts of workers. All quotes used are from interviews with sales assistants/managers from the respective stores as stated.

In addition to the participant observation, semi-structured interviews were held with twenty six of my colleagues and the managers of the stores. All members of staff were asked if they would participate and all consented. Because of the pressure on managers' time, their interviews were conducted in short bursts that consisted of me tape-recording responses to a few questions at a time (generally in some 'backstage' area such as their office, staffroom or lobby). Sales assistants were divided according to sex and interviewees were randomly

selected. Interviews were held at participants' convenience and lasted between 45 minutes and one and a half hours. Interviews were held around work hours and at a variety of locations. All interviewees consented to be tape-recorded and for notes to be made during interview. The interview itself consisted of a number of pre-formed questions that could be addressed in any order<sup>5</sup>.

Interviewees would often dart between questions and responses so I found myself changing the order of questions to suit each interview and to avoid repetition and taking up too much of the participant's time. Any other areas that staff wanted to talk about were incorporated into the interview to allow for other areas to be explored that I may have neglected or ignored. The interviews typically involved getting participants to qualify their responses as they would often refer to situations both of us had prior knowledge of, or had experienced during the course of my field role as worker/researcher. Interviews were recorded and transcribed with preliminary analysis informing subsequent interviews.

### ***Other material and conversations***

Further analysis focused upon the customer service training manuals, staff appraisal forms, interview selection criteria and company websites. In addition, promotional material from local clubs and the local shopping centre, conversations with promotional workers, customers and also workers from other stores or even within the organisations (head office, human resources etc) informed the research in various ways even if they are not fully alluded to in the proceeding text.

Ethical concerns were given careful consideration. All staff have been assigned false names and situations and events have been disguised as far as possible whilst attempting to retain some level of context. Where sensitive information was recorded or in cases where events or instances were revealed which could lead to disciplinary action being taken, participants were given the opportunity to negotiate the inclusion of such material in the research. Despite the ability to remove particular 'risky' statements such as bad customer service or in recruitment discrimination, surprisingly none of those interviewed chose to do so. I suspect this was a result of my position as an ex-worker and in some cases brief co-worker, but primarily this could be attributed to the trust that I managed to earn either through my own conduct and relationships or through achieving trust 'by proxy' through relevant gatekeepers and contacts.

Preserving the anonymity of the companies, branches and employees decreases any chance of recriminations. The major ethical issues over harm and privacy were negotiated through efforts to maintain anonymity throughout. Informed consent was achieved through notifying all those involved in the research from sales assistants to the upper levels of management of its aims and purpose. The only ethical challenge I faced concerned the extent of informing customers about my observing interaction in the store. However, doing so would have had serious consequences for shop-floor interaction that would have invalidated my findings and restricted the types of interaction I wanted to observe. Descriptions of customers are therefore deliberately vague and names of 'regulars' disguised when used.

## ***The shops***

A number of fashion retailers from a shopping centre in the North East of England were approached and three contrasting but comparable stores were selected to be involved from the initial sample. Each store had their own style of customer service and selling strategies. These provided points for comparison across the stores. The stores included 'Mojo', 'Croft' and 'Legend'.

### ***'Mojo'***

'Mojo' is a local independent fashion retailer selling mid-market fashion labels (i.e. 'Replay', 'G-star', 'Firetrap', 'Henleys') to the youngest target market of the stores (16-35yrs). The store pursued a highly pro-active approach to selling, with staff trained in product knowledge and how to negotiate delicate social encounters. Accompanying this strong sales ethic was an equally strong customer service ethic. This was tied into their overall sales strategy and involved providing friendly, helpful and knowledgeable service at all times. Ultimately 'Mojo' sought youthful employees that took an interest in all things 'trendy' and 'fashionable'. In order to convey this aspect of their image, workers had no designated 'uniform', but were required to meet a very specific dress code which varied through the week (and changed according to fashion trends with 'goth' and 'geek chic' – previously 'risky' appearances - both becoming acceptable as they became fashionable). This code restricted various forms of dress and appearance including certain patterns, fashion labels, hairstyles, facial hair and makeup. Workers were encouraged to drink in the trendiest bars, pubs and clubs through the provision of retail 'VIP passes', club tickets and flyers to gain free entry and other benefits.



### ***'Croft'***

'Croft' is an international fashion retailer selling its own brand of clothing. 'Croft' also held a pro-active approach to selling but aimed at a slightly older, more casual target market than 'Mojo' (21-50 yrs). Prices were slightly less expensive than 'Mojo'. Again, Employee's had no 'uniform' but were required to meet a dress code. This was based on a more casual aesthetic than 'Mojo' as workers could wear anything from jeans, combat pants, skirts, dresses, t-shirts and jumpers throughout the week and there were no colour or pattern restrictions. Hair and facial hair was simply to be kept clean and tidy without being closely monitored. Workers were to be very friendly towards customers and be sales-orientated. However, customers were not to feel pressured or harassed (although I did encounter rumours that previous staff were dismissed for failure to meet sales targets). Overall, the store was characterised by a strong customer service ethic and a pro-active sales approach that was less aggressive than 'Mojo' but that was seen as characteristic of 'Croft' shops around the world.

### ***'Legend'***

'Legend' is a UK national fashion retailer selling its own branded clothing aimed at a broad target market (18-50yrs) and was the cheapest of the three stores. Again workers had no 'uniform' but were required to dress according to a code of appearance. Men had to wear suits or shirts and ties and women had to wear suits or blouses/shirts and skirts. Customer service for this retailer essentially involved smiling and acknowledging customers but most of all, enabling 'self

service' and providing 'routine service' (Abiala, 2000). Contact with customers was kept to a minimum. The store operated along the lines of friendly 'low-contact' service and did not monitor the productivity (in terms of sales) of individual workers. Again, 'Legend', national in its scope, projected an overall company image and aesthetic that was reflected in branches across the UK.

### **Chapter outlines**

The following chapters of this thesis begin with a literature review. The literature on service work is rapidly growing as it becomes an increasingly dominant and diverse aspect of our economy and daily lives. The literature review presented here focuses upon approaches to theorising service work before looking at existing research that analyses gender and service work. In addition, the literature in this area also looks at sexual harassment that workers experience through work. This was an important area of focus as my research will further elaborate upon both male and female experiences of sexual harassment as a result of their occupation. Attention will also be drawn towards literature on surveillance and resistance and within service occupations as a great deal of research has targeted this area and this was also something which I wanted to explore. Similarly, where discernible, research that has considered whether service labour continues outside of the workplace will be outlined.

The first of the data chapters, chapter three, explores how male retail workers are *gendered* service workers and how this affects their experiences and opportunities in this workplace setting. The motivations and attraction that fashion retail held for these male workers for entering a 'female-dominated'

occupation will be examined before exploring the suggestion that service work is problematic for men and masculinities. Discussion focuses upon whether men find retail work 'risky' or are instead able to use it as a 'resource'. Although it can be argued that certain elements of this work can be seen as problematic for men and masculinities, greater exploration suggests that men are able to draw upon a number of resources to maintain a coherently hegemonic masculine identity. Having considered these issues, discussion moves on to consider how gender remains influential in recruitment and continues to structure management and worker perceptions of the skills and abilities of employees and colleagues. Data will be used to highlight that although some flexibility is observable in the gendered workplace performances of male and female workers, their behaviour remains structured according to gendered norms. The practices of 'bitching' and being 'wild' will be used as examples to illustrate how categories of immanence control the free expression of these activities based upon gender. Discussion will then shift towards the ways in which certain work tasks remain gendered and how the act of selling reveals both male and female workers exchange their identities as part of the product being sold. This latter point directly challenges notions that only female workers are expected to sell themselves as part of commodity exchange and is explored in greater detail in the following chapter.

Chapter four analyses how workers are sexualised and the ways their sexualities become part of the product on offer. Data will be used to illustrate that workers are sexualised in different ways and degrees across the stores and that this was heavily influenced by brand strategy and approach to sales. The

concept of 'sexual servicing' developed by Adkins (1995) will be used to argue that both male and female workers sexually service customers. However, in light of the fact that the sexuality of workers and customers presents a myriad of possible interactions, the ways of sexual servicing and the form it takes, demands the concept be refined. In this chapter I suggest that sexual servicing can be developed into three categories: heterosexual or normative sexual servicing; homosocial servicing and homosexual servicing. All three categories involve workers selling their sexuality (whether it be mobile or fixed) as part of the product of their labour. Attention then focuses upon the way this servicing is used to form relationships with customers which are then exploited by the organisation and by individual sales assistants. Having considered this, I will then discuss how the sexualisation of workers places them at risk of sexual harassment and how far male and female workers are able to cope with this harassment. The chapter then moves onto discuss whether the arguments presented indicate the possibility for transgressive or 'hybrid' gender identities in this setting. This will be refuted using the data and drawing on arguments from the previous chapter to illustrate instead that men and women follow traditional hegemonic values. The notion of transgression and 'hybridity' is further discredited by the stigmatisation of particular identities and the fears that workers verbalised in terms of being 'misrecognised' as either homosexual or promiscuous. Finally, this chapter explores how the commodification of workers' sexualities is not bound to workplace but becomes mobile in the service of the organisation. The commodification of these sexualities leaves workers open to further exploitation outside of the workplace. However, to view this process only in terms of exploitation is too simplistic. Instead I will illustrate that workers can

derive pleasure from the way their sexualities are commodified in the workplace through enjoying the sexual attention they receive and encounters they partake in with customers away from the workplace setting.

Chapter five explores the notions of 'customer service' and how customers are perceived. Three themes will be examined – customers as powerful, customers as pleasurable and customers as a problem. Workers perceived customers as problematic in a variety of ways and I have developed a typology using workers' own classifications and comments to illustrate the many ways that customers are difficult or infuriating for workers. The rest of the chapter is dedicated to exploring how managers and organisations control and monitor the labour and productivity of employees and scope for resistance to these. Workers find many covert ways to display resistance and these will be outlined to demonstrate that retail workers find ways to relieve stress, support each other and refuse subordination.

Chapter six focuses upon the extent to which work and non-work filter into each other for these workers and how far they continue their labour performances outside the work environment. Discussion begins with the conceptual difficulties regarding the distinction between work and non-work as it applies to retail workers. Having considered these issues, I analyse particular aspects of retail work that illustrate the permeable boundaries between work and non-work. These areas include consideration of the sociability of employees and how this is appropriated by organisations before looking at worker's subjective perceptions of their *self* or personality and the cultural value that workers attach

to being fashionable. In addition, the outside interests of the workers and the extent of 'permeation' between these and their work were examined. The extent of these examples was vast, however two were recurrent – drinking/clubbing and sexual relationships. These are explored to further highlight the so-called 'fuzzy boundaries' between work and non-work before looking more specifically at how certain retail workers continue their labour performances outside of work. Although workers can use relationships with customers as a resource for increasing productivity this can be a double-edged sword. Relationships result in work transcending the physical workplace and becoming 'mobile' as workers continue their labour through the relations they have established. This is necessary to maintain relationships with customers and avoid complaints or difficult situations at work in the future. However, the male workers often felt that continuing their aesthetic labour performances was a necessary precaution to prevent confrontation or threat of physical violence while out drinking. Similarly, the female workers also felt compelled to continue their sexual servicing in the same situations. This chapter explores how female workers perceive themselves at greater risk of sexual harassment and sexual violence as a result of their aesthetic labour performances and how continuing with this labour was a method they used to avoid such risks. Despite this, I will examine how establishing relations with customers and maintaining them is not always so oppressive. The chapter concludes by looking at how the 'fuzzy boundaries' between work and non-work can be simultaneously enjoyable and confer status but also inflict 'hidden injuries' upon the workers in the study.

The final chapter draws together the research findings and evaluates the overall research project. I will examine the extent to which I have been able to answer the questions that to which I sought answers and consider how the research developed during its life course. Given the condensed nature of the research and the volume of material produced, it was impossible to include all of my findings in the finished thesis. This chapter will briefly explore these areas and suggest possible future avenues of research as I reflect upon the project as a whole.

## Notes:

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<sup>1</sup> A 'microethnography' can be characterised as focusing 'giving emphasis to particular behaviours in particular settings rather than attempting to portray a whole cultural system' (Wolcott, 1990: 64)

<sup>2</sup> All shops and participants have been assigned pseudonyms to preserve anonymity.

<sup>3</sup> For a more detailed account of allocated days in each retailer see Appendix A.

<sup>4</sup> All fieldnotes and interviews were transcribed into NVIVO which was then used to facilitate analysis. Anticipating a large amount of data to be generated throughout the course of the ethnography I chose to use this software in an attempt to keep the data accessible, organised and easy to navigate. Using the document coder, data was organised into themes and in respect to answering my research questions. Various node reports and models were then produced to aid analysis.

<sup>5</sup> For a list of interview questions see Appendix B

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

### **Introduction**

Research into service work has proliferated over the years as this sector has become a more prominent feature of the UK economy. As researchers have increasingly examined this area they have raised questions over how to theorise 'service work'. The main themes that will be discussed here include: service work as 'enterprising'; service work as dehumanizing; the 'customer-oriented bureaucracy' and aesthetics and embodiment. Debates surrounding these characterisations of service work have been extremely productive in terms of recognising the similarities and differences among service sector occupations as well as the variations in 'service work' across sectors. These issues will be explored at the beginning of this literature review before looking more specifically at key literature on gender and service work.

Within the service labour literature there is a vast array of research on gender. Yet this remains somewhat asymmetric with women proving to be the predominant focus of investigation. This is probably due to the large numbers of women that make up the service sector labour market. Research into this field has thus relied on general theories of women's subordinate position in society to explain the work involved and the status of the worker in relation to customers/clients. However, men have, for a long time, occupied positions in the service economy alongside female workers. When male workers are discussed in the service labour literature, three themes emerge. First of all, there is the contention that although men work alongside women the types of



work they do and their work-based performances are different (Hochschild, 1983; Adkins, 1995; Adkins & Lury, 1999; Folgero & Fjeldstad, 1995; Taylor & Tyler, 1998; 2000, Korczynski, 2003).

Second, there seems to be an emerging awareness that men are sexualised and suffer sexual harassment and abuse at the hands of fellow workers and customers/clients. Within this, there seems to be divisions between those that have found men the victims of *homophobic harassment* (Williams, 2003) and others that underline men are sexually/aesthetically objectified *in the same way* as women (Hughes & Tadic, 1998; Nickson *et al*, 2000; 2001; 2003) and finally, those that see men as subject to the *same and different* forms of harassment and abuse (Guerrier & Adib, 2000).

Third, some research has focused on men's entry into 'female-concentrated' or traditionally 'female jobs' and the challenges they face as a result of entering such occupations (Cockburn, 1988; Cross and Bagilhole, 2002; Lupton, 2000; 2006; Hockey and Robinson, 2006). This work challenges certain proposals that service work opens up potential for gender hybridity in terms of behaviour and identity. Working in a female-concentrated occupation can be problematic for individual men in a number of ways. In particular, their masculine identity is scrutinised, challenged and questioned by both men and women in a variety of ways, within different settings and in diverse contexts. The ways men respond to the challenges arising from their occupational location are diverse, yet these still maintain male workers' position as the dominant gender (Cross and Bagilhole, 2002).

Despite these valuable acknowledgements, theoretical neglect remains in relation to men in 'feminine' occupations that require aesthetic labour. My own research aims to explore how gender affects work in these environments. This will lead to greater understanding of the processes through which aesthetic labour remains specifically gendered/sexualised.

Discussion in this chapter will also outline existing arguments relating to control/surveillance and resistance within service work settings. Some authors (e.g. Taylor, 1998; 2002) argue that service work is 'misrepresented' as 'cultural work' and that the high levels of surveillance that service workers are subjected to are often ignored. Surveillance and control appear to be multi-dimensional. Rather than emanating directly from the organisation or management, control and surveillance instead operate at a number of levels (Seymour and Sandiford, 2005). However, despite this, research has also documented how service workers can successfully negotiate the mechanisms of control within the workplace and exhibit resistance to the organisation itself and the discourse of 'customer service' (e.g. Hochschild, 1983; Bolton & Boyd, 2003; Mulholland, 2004).

Finally, attention will be directed towards existing research which documents the ability of work to transcend the workplace – in particular, what happens when workers encounter customers outside of the workplace? Empirical research in this area is sparse and so what little information is available needs to be evaluated. Many researchers merely comment upon such occurrences as

'chance encounters' (Hochschild, 1983; Williams, 2003; Hughes & Tadic, 1998). Even where attention is focused upon this area, thorough analysis seems to be substantially lacking. In perhaps one of the most competent examinations of the 'fluidity of work' Guerrier & Adib (2004) highlight how the work of holiday reps constantly oscillates between work and play. This will be considered in greater detail before finally summarising the issues covered in the chapter as a whole.

### **Theorising 'service work' and retail**

The following discussion explores some of the key themes and conceptual frameworks that have been developed to theorise contemporary service work. The ones I have chosen to focus upon here include: enterprise culture and the 'cult of the customer' (DuGay, 1996); service work as dehumanizing; 'customer-oriented bureaucracy' (Korczynski, 2000; 2001); aesthetics and embodiment. Attention will then centre upon recent work that seeks to synthesise certain elements of existing theories to develop a firmer understanding of retail work.

#### ***Enterprising selves and the 'cult of the customer'***

DuGay (1996) analyzes how individuals are 'made up' at work. He considers the discourses of 'enterprise culture', the 'sovereign consumer' or 'cult of the customer' and their impact upon organizational reform and individual subjectivity. DuGay charts 'enterprise culture'<sup>1</sup> as an influential symbol and goal of Thatcherism during the 1980s and beyond.

This had a major impact on promoting organisational change and 'organisational excellence' (DuGay, 1996; Wray-Bliss, 2001). These discourses of 'enterprising selves' and 'excellent organizations' are fundamentally connected to discursive notions of the 'sovereign consumer' and 'cult of the customer.' More particularly, such discursive regimes directly structure organizational logics, their approach to and provision of customer service, as well as individuals' experiences of service sector employment. DuGay asserts that the 'character' of the consumer has become crucial in reconstructing organizations:

*Within the discourse of enterprise/excellence consumers are constituted as autonomous, self-regulating and self-actualizing individual actors seeking to maximize their 'quality of life'...by assembling a lifestyle, or lifestyles, through personalized acts of choice in the market place...Within the discourse of enterprise/excellence an active, 'enterprising' consumer is placed at the moral centre of the market-based universe. What counts as 'good', or 'virtuous', in this universe is judged by reference to the apparent needs, desires and projected preferences of the 'sovereign consumer'...it is the moral obligation of each and every commercial organization, to become obsessed with 'staying close to the customer' (Peters & Waterman, 1982) (1996: 77)*

However, DuGay extends this reinvention process across organizations to include the constitution of individual subjectivity through work. The discourse of enterprise culture blurs the boundaries between spheres of

production/consumption, public/private and workers/consumers. According to DuGay, organizational reform motivated by 'enterprise culture' and 'sovereign consumers' has vast implications for those involved in service provision:

*In reconstructing the commercial organization around the character of the sovereign consumer, the work-based subject is also reconceptualized: the employee is re-imagined as an individual actor in search of meaning, responsibility, a sense of personal achievement and a maximized quality of life. Work is now construed as an activity through which people produce and discover a sense of personal identity. In effect, workers are encouraged to view work as consumers: work becomes an arena in which people exhibit an 'enterprising' or 'consuming' relationship to self...work as an activity is re-imagined through the language of consumer culture. (1996: 78)*

As workers are 'encouraged to view work as consumers', they are encouraged to identify with their customers and be self-reflexive in terms of offering the kind of 'quality service' they would expect from service providers. Consequently, 'good' customer service requires workers to 'instrumentally assemble, manage and market aspects of their experience and identity as consumers' (1996: 79). It has been argued elsewhere that this represents an attempt by management to 'govern the soul' of employees (Rose, 1990).in a way that paid employment becomes a means for achieving self-actualization and fulfilment (DuGay, 1996; Wray-Bliss, 2001).

This perspective of service work suggests that 'work' becomes another means through which self-actualizing and self-reflexive subjects constitute their identities. However, we need to be cautious over the extent to which individuals can constitute their identities easily and on equal terms. Similarly, we must acknowledge that new forms and processes of exclusion arise as a result of such discursive influences upon organizational and wider culture:

*The ethical vocabulary of enterprise re-imagines activities and agents and their relationship to each other according to its own regulatory ideals. Thus, the entrepreneurial language of responsible self-advancement, for example, is linked to a new perception of those 'outside civility' – the excluded and marginalized who cannot or will not conduct themselves in an appropriately 'responsible' manner. Pathologies that were until recently represented and acted upon 'socially' – homelessness, unemployment and so forth – become re-individualized through their positioning within a new ethical vocabulary and hence subject to new and often more intense forms of surveillance and control. Because they are now represented as responsible individuals with a moral duty to take care of themselves, pathological subjects can blame no one but themselves for the problems they face. (DuGay, 1996: 179)*

This perspective of service work is focused upon the discursive regimes that influence societies, organizational cultures and individual subjectivity – all of which appear to be tightly interwoven. Within this discourse of 'enterprise culture' or 'enterprising selves', individuals are ultimately constructed as

consumers, free to choose what kind of occupation they want, how well they perform and their career progression. Thus service work, and any form of work for that matter, becomes part of an ethical construction of self as individuals seek self-advancement and fulfilment through the choices they make in relation to their career and lifestyle. Responsibility ultimately rests with the individual and as DuGay notes, this creates new forms of exclusion, surveillance and control. Any worker who finds their job unfulfilling or is ineffective, is seen as having made inappropriate choices or as 'inappropriate' to the job in question. However, some authors argue that it is the organisations themselves and the subordination of worker to customer that are fundamentally oppressive.

### ***Service work as dehumanizing***

In contrast to the positive imagery produced and reiterated through the discursive regime of 'enterprise culture' cited above, there are theorists who portray contemporary service work as dehumanizing, stressful, demeaning and a source of alienation. The two authors I will focus upon here include Hochschild (1983) and Ritzer (1996).

Although I have already focused upon the problems within her conceptual framework it is still important to underline some of the themes of Hochschild's work. Keen to emphasise the negative consequences of the 'commercialization of feeling' Hochschild argues that those involved in front-line service work risk becoming alienated from the products of their labour - the display of feeling and feeling itself. She argues that this 'estranges' workers from their own smiles as organizations appropriate emotions:

*The company lays claims not simply to her physical motions – how she handles food trays – but to her emotional actions and the way they show in the ease of a smile. The workers I spoke to often spoke of their smiles as being ‘on’ them but not ‘of’ them. They were seen as an extension of the make-up, the uniform...(1983: 7-8)*

Thus, Hochschild perceives emotional labour as a source of intense alienation as workers relinquish aspects of their ‘true’ self, thus sacrificing a ‘healthy sense of wholeness’ (1983: 184). She goes on to state as companies increasingly offer worker’s selves and emotions for sale, the more these risk ‘seeming false to the individual worker, and the more difficult it becomes for him or her to know which territory of self to claim’ (1983: 196). Hochschild focuses on the ‘commercialization of feeling’ as a source of alienation inherent to service work. However, Ritzer (1996), in his theory of McDonaldization documents further aspects of service work that are dehumanizing and demeaning.

Ritzer’s (1996) work challenges notions of employee empowerment and ‘enterprising selves’ within service work suggesting that rationalisation has intensified among service work and across society as a whole. Ritzer uses the fast-food chain McDonald’s as an example of the intensification and application of Taylorist principles within service work. Although I do not have the scope to fully explore the issues relating to McDonaldisation here, I will focus upon two dimensions of this process that highlight the dehumanizing aspects of service work and ‘McJobs’<sup>2</sup> – deskilling and irrationality.



Within the McDonaldisation thesis, Ritzer suggests that the consequent deskilling that occurs as a result of training workers to focus on single tasks as part of an 'assembly line' creates a low-skilled and disposable workforce. The rationalisation involved in training and treating workers as such leads to organizations treating them like a 'mechanical nut' or 'human robot' (1996: 139).

Similarly, this intensification of rationalisation actually leads to irrational consequences. The character of the work involved in 'McJobs' (and Ritzer notes in relation to McDonalds) leads to stress and frustration for workers and ultimately worker burnout. Although the deskilled nature of such work means that employees are easily replaced, this can also lead to inefficiency and staffing problems thus compromising the very rational principles on which McDonaldisation is based. In this way, service work has little capacity for 'empowerment' and instead represents a serious challenge to those who seek fulfilment from their occupation.

However, such approaches tend to overemphasise the negative consequences of service work and leave little room for the pleasure or enjoyment that many workers derive from their occupation. In particular, Newman (1999) highlights that even low-skilled service work can offer individuals benefits in terms of self-sufficiency, and dignity, as well as providing opportunities to develop specific competencies such as adaptability, customer service and communication skills. In order to capture more effectively the contradictions evident in discourses

about service work and employee experiences Korczynski develops the concept of the 'customer-oriented bureaucracy'.

### ***The 'customer-oriented bureaucracy'***

One of the most influential conceptual frameworks emerging in recent years has been developed by Korczynski (2001; 2002). Looking for an adequate model through which to develop an understanding of the processes, relations and contradictions of service work, Korczynski develops the concept of the 'customer-oriented bureaucracy'. The concept is captured by Kerfoot and Korczynski below:

*in contemporary capitalism, service work is driven by a competitive terrain in which both service quality and price are key factors. There are both logics of customer-orientation (related to the service quality element of competition) and bureaucratization (related to the price element of competition) underpinning service work. The concept of the customer-oriented bureaucracy is put forward as an ideal type of work organization in which these dual, and potentially contradictory, logics are simultaneously present. (2005: 390)*

This approach is useful because it recognises the potential for competing (and sometimes contradictory) logics to be operating within organizations and discourses of 'customer service' or service work. Korczynski acknowledges the rise of the customer as a figure of authority, but argues that this discourse 'joins rather than supplants' bureaucratic logic particularly in front-line service work

(Korczynski, 2001: 82). In particular, Korczynski visualises notions of rationality, efficiency and customer-orientation as existing alongside each other and operating through service organisations.

Using call centres in Australia, the USA and Japan as the focus of empirical investigation Korczynski suggests that:

*Rationalised emotional labour was demanded in the context of pseudo-relationships in which efficient task completion was paramount.*

*Bureaucratic measurement of the process of work was strengthened alongside the systematic development of norms of customer empathy.*

(2001: 97)

In addition, Korczynski argues that despite attempts by management to maintain 'balance' in these logics, inevitably 'fractures' appeared in the 'fragile social order' (Korczynski, 2001: 98). The concept of the customer-oriented bureaucracy in his opinion is therefore more satisfactory than say Mcdonaldisation because it implies and allows for 'more spaces and more explicit tensions' in employees' experiences of service work than if focus narrowly considers rationalisation alone (Korczynski, 2001: 98). The concept of the customer-oriented bureaucracy appears to be gaining in stature among service work research as authors elsewhere have found the concept extremely useful for examining the contradictions and tensions that characterise contemporary service sector employment (Bolton and Houlihan, 2005; Brannan 2005; Forseth, 2005). However, despite the utility of the customer-

oriented bureaucracy, the concept neglects the embodied or aesthetic processes and social relations of 'body work' that characterise many contemporary service occupations. In order to theorise service work in terms of embodiment we need to move beyond the customer-oriented bureaucracy and instead towards the concept of 'aesthetic labour'.

### ***Aesthetics and embodiment***

Within the service labour literature there has been increasing recognition of the need to look at embodiment and aesthetics as fundamental to certain types of service work and as the number of jobs requiring paid 'body work' is increasing (Crang, 1997; Tyler and Abbott, 1998; Tyler and Taylor, 1998; Sharma and Black, 2001; Wellington and Bryson, 2001; Wolkowitz, 2002). The concept of aesthetic labour has already been outlined in the previous chapter but it is worthwhile revisiting here to explore further ways of theorising service work. The concept of 'aesthetic labour' has been gaining currency among academic researchers in the field of service work as interest in this area expands.<sup>3</sup> The work of Pettinger (2005a) and Wright (2005) provides the focus of discussion here. Both authors examine retail work but look at how aesthetic labour is used in different contexts.

Wright (2005) explores how aesthetic labour is used to 'commodify respectability' in bookshops. He underlines the need to examine the relations between workers and the products they sell in order to understand retail work. Wright moves beyond Nickson et al.'s focus on personal grooming and attractiveness to incorporate alternative aesthetics. He claims that within the

context of the bookshop recruitment is based upon 'aesthetic judgement' and an individual's ability to express 'love' of books (2005: 305). Wright suggests that the aesthetic labour involved in bookshops offers insight into the generation of distinction and meanings involving certain cultural goods and the value attached to them. He claims in relation to the bookshop that this is rooted in the historical and contemporary association of books and reading with 'constructions of the well-read, cultivated coherent self' (2005: 311). This has a direct impact upon recruitment as workers are expected to demonstrate and embody certain cultural capitals. Wright follows Skeggs' (1997) development of Bourdieu's work on cultural capital.

According to Wright, the bookshop becomes a place where workers must demonstrate various forms of cultural capital – embodiment being only one of these. Following Skeggs, Wright suggests that other dispositions and capital that workers must demonstrate include appreciation of the cultural goods being sold and educational qualifications/aspirations. In this way, the aesthetic labour of bookshop workers involves more than just appearance and demeanour. This is in large part because of the expectations of managers in relation to 'expertise' within the book trade.

Consequently, Wright argues that the aesthetic labour of bookshop workers underlines the location of books and reading within a hierarchy of cultural goods and cultural capital. However, he also suggests that concern with embodiment 'might miss' how class shapes and contours particular orientations to the 'authentic self'. In particular, Wright asserts that both management and workers

in the book trade counterbalance the 'inauthentic selves' often presented through emotional and aesthetic labour by appealing to notions of self-development and emotional/aesthetic attachment to cultural goods such as books (2005: 311).

Thus, ultimately, Wright is suggesting in the context of the bookshop, that work must also be understood in terms of an overall aesthetic project of the self and the role this plays in processes of class formation and conceptualizations of labour that 'relate to emotional or draw on aesthetic criteria' (2005: 312).

Wright's research is useful for analyzing how aesthetic labour can move beyond embodiment to incorporate an 'aesthetics of the self' and cultural value attached to certain goods. We shall see throughout this thesis and more specifically in chapter six that similar processes were apparent for the workers in this study. However, fundamental differences remain concerning both the aesthetic labour demanded of workers and the cultural value attached to the goods sold in the book trade and fashion retail. Therefore we must look more closely at the specifics of fashion retail and the aesthetic labour of the workers employed in this sector.

One of the most impressive studies of retail work in recent years is that of Pettinger (2004; 2005a; 2005b; 2006). This research compliments my own through looking at the way fashion retail is specifically gendered and also in using aesthetic labour as a conceptual tool. Keen to develop an alternative paradigm for examining retail work, Pettinger (2006) argues that labelling retail as 'service' is too simplistic. Instead she proposes that we take into account:

*the embodiment of workers who...perform physical work to manipulate the products and aesthetic work to present themselves (Wolkowitz, 2002; Witz et al, 2003)...[as well as] the role of retail in the circulation of goods from the point of production to consumption (Sayer and Walker, 1992)..*  
(Pettinger, 2006: 62-3)

Furthermore, Pettinger underlines the need for a 'detailed and grounded consideration' of the work involved in the service sector (2006: 63). She claims to achieve this through examining the manual and domestic tasks that form a large part of the sales assistant's role in addition to the interactions between customer and worker. What I wish to emphasise here is her application of 'aesthetic labour' within the fashion retail sector.

Pettinger (2005a) sees the key aspect of the 'aesthetic labour' of fashion retail workers as the 'extent to which employees model the products they are employed to sell.' This she argues is a reflection of a retailer's brand within a stratified and competitive market. In addition, she focuses on gender as a crucial factor affecting employees' aesthetic labour performances:

*...modelling the products involves the employees in a feminine performativity that relies on the workers possessing particular forms of social and cultural capitals and reflects an ability to embody 'fashion'...enacting certain forms of femininity is fundamental to the*

*gendering of employment and work in the retail sector and is directed at enhancing sales in the competitive marketplace. (2005a: 461)<sup>4</sup>*

Put more simply, workers must behave, dress and style themselves in a particular way in line with the aesthetic of the store and in order to appeal to its target market. This is used as an element of the brand strategies of fashion retailers to exploit the stylistic tendencies, dispositions and lifestyles of workers to enhance sales and economic success (Pettinger, 2005a). This work usefully builds upon Nickson et al's concept of aesthetic labour as it more specifically outlines the aesthetic labour of employees. Pettinger pinpoints that the embodied dispositions of workers, the way they manipulate, present and model the products being sold as well as how they keep the shop environment clean, tidy and attractive all contribute to the production of meaning for the brand and the products on offer.

In addition, her work extends the scope of 'aesthetic labour' to more adequately allow for employees to influence organizational aesthetics. She suggests that the pre-existing habitus of employees is more important than the concept of aesthetic labour allows in Nickson et al's formulation. As the fashion market is continually changing so too can the 'aesthetic labour' required of employees. This is an important development conceptually as it enables greater consideration of how worker's pre-existing dispositions and cultural capital facilitate or hinder organizational change.



In particular, Pettinger's analysis is very informative when considering the heterogeneity of service work and variations among types of work dictated by the brand strategies of different organizations and the nature of the products being sold. This next section explores arguments and accounts that emphasise the variations among service sector occupations.

### ***Variations among service work***

The theories of service work outlined above are wide-ranging and point to the fact that service work can be performed in different ways and in a variety of contexts. This is echoed elsewhere by authors who acknowledge that 'service work' is not homogenous (Helman and De Chernatony, 1999; Abiala, 2000; Korczynski, 2001). Instead, despite many occupations sharing characteristics, there appears to be a great deal of variation among jobs and types of work. Pettinger uses Abiala's (2000) typology of service work to inform her own categories of 'service' within the stores she researched. The typology that Abiala develops is useful for distinguishing the different forms of 'service' that workers perform. Constructing four categories of service allows us to consider different forms of service and how occupations may involve workers performing any or all of them depending upon context. These categories include: 'work first, customer later' (opticians, dentists, motor mechanics etc.); routine selling (cashiers etc.); personalised services (waitresses, and hairdressers etc.); and persuasive selling (salesmen etc.).

The 'work first, customer later' category includes occupations where workers sometimes have 'expert knowledge'. The emphasis in this work is to perform

some sort of functional service that relies on specialist training or knowledge. Being friendly to customers can be seen as beneficial but it is not a top priority in relation to the specialist labour they are selling. Typical occupations that would characterise this include opticians, watchmakers, mechanics, plumbers etc. The second category of 'routine selling' typically involves occupations that sell goods in a distinct sales environment. Routine selling differs from the other forms of selling/service because it involves less contact between customer and worker. Workers are required to be friendly towards customers for as long as the (usually fleeting) encounter occurs. A typical example of this kind of 'service' would include the work performed by supermarket checkout operators.

The third and fourth categories are much more relevant here as they constitute a large part of the 'service' involved in retail work. 'Personalised service' typically involves workers relating to customers and as Abiala claims 'employees of "personalised services" seem to be the interaction experts of service work. They know how to handle people' (2000: 219). Within this category, Abiala suggests that selling is not often emphasised but that repeat business is encouraged through customer-worker relationships. In addition, she states that workers in these types of professions often receive commission or 'tips' to boost their income. Therefore, workers such as waitresses and hairdressers are more invested in providing 'good service' as it becomes directly tied to their income. The final category Abiala constructs is characterised by 'persuasive selling'. She uses salesmen and travel guides as examples but we can extend this to include any occupations that involve a pro-active approach to sales. Training is often seen as an important element of

these jobs due to the pressure to meet targets and perceived need for in-depth product knowledge.

Pettinger uses this typology to create her own categories of the service work involved among different stores. She distinguishes between enabling self-service for customers (through re-stocking, tidying and size-ordering), providing routine service (processing transactions on the till) and personalised service (where customers and workers have more interaction e.g. through offering opinions on items etc.)

However, as we shall see in the thesis presented here, I suggest that we retain Abiala's category of 'persuasive selling' as increasingly retailers are monitoring employee performance through ability to meet targets and transferring responsibility for economic success from an organizational level down to individual stores, departments and workers. Pettinger (2004) argues that we need to consider how the brand strategies of stores influence the nature of work performed by sales assistants but she does not include any retailers where 'maximising sales' through active selling is an integral part of the worker's role. The influence that this has upon employee experiences of work is underlined by Korczynski who suggests that different logics 'determine the structure and experience of work' (2001: 98). In response, the stores I selected for this investigation held comparable but contrasting approaches to selling and so this allows for greater consideration of Abiala's initial typology in relation to retail work as well as the effect that pressure to meet sales targets has upon worker experiences.

The discussion so far has focused upon the main themes surrounding conceptions of service work. These arguments have demonstrated the variety of approaches to theorising service and also highlight the complexity of this area. I argue, in line with Pettinger, that we need to consider service work by examining the actual work that employees do, as well as the social relations involved in their work-based performances. The rest of this chapter is devoted to exploring literature that highlights social relations and service work. These areas will focus upon gender and service work, control and resistance and the ability of service work to 'escape' the workplace setting.

### **Gender and sexuality in service work**

Research that examines gender and sexuality in service occupations is vast. Attention here focuses on the three themes outlined at the start of the chapter: men and women as different sorts of workers; emerging recognition of male emotional/aesthetic labourers as objectified; and service work as problematic for men. Finally discussion will explore issues relating to sexual harassment in service work. Although I have already outlined my own preference for the concept of aesthetic labour, much of the literature has, until recently, relied on Hochschild's concept of emotional labour. Subsequently much of the discussion oscillates between the two concepts throughout the chapter. This does not detract from the overall focus on aesthetic labour, but rather incorporates previous research in similar areas to pinpoint relevant material.

### ***Different genders, different workers***

Despite the many problems inherent in Hochschild's conceptual framework of 'emotional labour', there are additional findings in her work that remain valuable. In examining the airline industry Hochschild also draws attention to the role of women in the production and delivery of emotional labour. The occupation of Flight Attendant at the time of Hochschild's research was traditionally female-dominated and more contemporary research proves that this remains the case not only for the airline industry, but also for other forms of service sector work involving 'emotional labour' (Adkins, 1995; Folgero & Fjeldstad, 1995; Hughes & Tadic, 1998; Taylor, 1998; Tyler & Taylor, 1998; Guerrier & Adib, 2000; Taylor & Tyler, 2000; Williams, 2003). What is interesting in Hochschild's work is that she uncovered how men and women may be of the same rank, perform the same duties and hold the same responsibilities, but that the work of a Flight Attendant was 'one job for a woman and another for a man' (1983: 171). Also, Hochschild asserts that emotional labour is not as important for men and that it is important for men and women in different ways. Hochschild suggests this is due to four consequences of women's unequal access to economic resources, authority and social status. First of all, Hochschild claims that women's lack of economic resources leads them to use 'feeling' a resource that can be offered and exchanged in the marketplace. Consequently, emotional labour is constructed, in Hochschild's eyes, as more important for women. The other three consequences relate to Hochschild's ideas that emotional labour is important to men and women in different ways. According to her, men and women tend to perform *different kinds* of emotional labour. The illustrative example she uses is the comparison between (female) flight attendants and (male) debt collectors. In

this way, she builds up a polarised model of female emotional labourers as caring, beautiful sex objects with male workers portrayed as authoritative, aggressive and forceful. In addition, Hochschild reports that the general subordinate position occupied by women leaves them with weaker 'status shields' against abuse from customers (1983: 162). The lack of authority that women thus have in the service setting leads them to use different 'portions of the managed heart' in the commercial setting, for example, Hochschild asserts that women are more likely to react to their subordinate position by 'making defensive use of sexual beauty, charm and relational skills' (1983: 162). In contrast, Hochschild found that as a consequence of the lower status of women, men in the same job had greater claims to authority. Passengers generally assumed that male flight attendants had more authority than women and also that they tended to react to passengers as if they actually held more authority.

In addition to this, Hochschild also looks at cultural ideas surrounding women (and to a lesser extent men). She suggests that women have traditionally been seen as adept at employing 'feminine wiles' and thought of as better able than men to manipulate and manage feeling and expression (1983: 164). She also highlights the unpaid labour traditionally performed by women and the way that 'mothering silently attaches itself to many a job description' (1983: 170).

Hochschild also raises the point that women 'accommodate' their subordination, but do not do so passively. She claims women have the skills to 'actively adapt feeling to a need or purpose at hand' while maintaining the appearance of passivity (1983: 167). Nevertheless, the notion of the (female) worker that she

constructs throughout the course of her research is of a passive individual controlled by the mechanisms of large scale organisations.

There was also sexualisation involved in the portrayal of flight attendants in advertising strategies and in the forms of sociability promoted in recruitment and training. Hochschild argues that a middle-class femininity informed selection procedures and training practices. This form of femininity casts female flight attendants as symbols of womanhood. Two traditionally 'feminine' qualities – mothering and sexual desirability were key elements of the work involved and formed the basis of interactions between passengers and flight attendants. These forms of sexualisation are not only evident in the airline industry, but can be located in other forms of service work (Adkins, 1995; Folgero & Fjeldstad, 1995; McDowell, 1995; Hughes & Tadic, 1998; Taylor & Tyler, 1998; 2000; Guerrier & Adib, 2000).

Adkins (1995) looks at the sexualisation of the female workforce in the tourist industry and found both overt and covert forms of sexualisation in operation. Employees in the areas that Adkins researched were subject to rigid appearance-based criteria. This was explained as necessary because of customer expectations rather than organisational policy. However, Adkins found that this was not applied universally and that men, in particular, escaped the same scrutiny. This is especially marked by the way recruitment criteria stipulated female workers should be 'attractive'. This was never applied to men. According to Adkins, certain occupations within the research setting did require men to be 'smart', but there was no reference to men's sexual desirability.

Adkins concludes that jobs themselves do not require specific gender traits, but that they are always already gendered. Women, she says, were employed 'because of what they are *as women*' (italics original, 1995: 112). The women in her study had to endure forms of sexual harassment from male management, fellow employees, as well as from customers. Sexualisation became part of the regulations imposed by management. Conditions and controls over appearance and uniform requirements 'acted to sexually commodify women workers: to turn them into commercial sex objects' (1995: 133). Subsequently, Adkins argues that sexual attractiveness became a naturalized resource to be exchanged in the labour market. This maintained the powerful position enjoyed by men in the workplace as they were not required to exchange their sexual desirability and consequently not subjected to exploitation on this basis. The complexity of the relationships and practices of sexualisation with regard to men is something I will review shortly, however, first I want to briefly outline how gender intersects with other stratifying factors in affecting the service sector labour market.

One thing that most emotional/aesthetic labour jobs have in common is their relatively low-status. Many writers point towards the fact that jobs which require emotional/aesthetic labour are traditionally associated with women to explain this (Hochschild, 1983; Folgero & Fjeldstad, 1995). However, it is not only women who find themselves in service occupations. Guerrier & Adib (2000) highlight that service occupations are commonly filled by individuals who belong to groups with a weak position in the labour market e.g. women, ethnic minorities and young people. Thus, the expectations placed upon service workers and the interaction between employees and customers can be seen as



a highly complex interplay between social expectations concerning status and subordination of particular groups, organizational service ethics driven by the profit motive and the assertion of dominance of clients over staff (Hochschild, 1983; Adkins, 1995; Hughes & Tadic, 1998; Tyler & Taylor, 1998; Guerrier & Adib, 2000; Korczynski *et al*, 2000).

Although writers such as Adkins underline that men are the dominant group when it comes to reaping the benefits of emotional labour, what they fail to grasp is that men also perform 'emotion work' and have exchanged emotional labour across a number of occupations for quite some time. The relationships between male emotional/aesthetic labourers and their customers can be fraught with the same difficulties and inequalities that female workers experience in similar situations.

### ***Objectified men***

Recent research has highlighted the ways that men also suffer sexualisation, exploitation and subordination in service work (Folgero & Fjeldstad, 1995; McDowell, 1995; Hughes & Tadic, 1998; Guerrier & Adib, 2000; Williams, 2003). This disputes Adkins' claim that 'men's sexual "selves" are not the subject of appropriation' (1995: 153). Men quite clearly are sexualised in service sector employment. Male workers compete with each other and with women for 'aesthetic labour' jobs and sell 'heterosexuality' as a commodity in relationships with clients (McDowell, 1995). Also, men in traditionally 'feminine' roles continually have their sexual identity questioned and can be sexualised through being subject to homophobic abuse (Folgero & Fjeldstad, 1995;

Hughes & Tadic, 1998; Williams, 2003). In the most overt manifestation of sexualisation, men can be sexually harassed, by women, and other men (Guerrier & Adib, 2000; Williams, 2003).

These findings do not completely negate Adkins' arguments, her explanations are valid given the data she gathered, but we need to revise some of her initial ideas. For example, Adkins is correct in stating men could initiate and define sexual encounters and reap numerous benefits – i.e. boosted ego's and sexual thrills. We can accept that the 'sexual commodification of women workers produced a sexual power relationship between men customers and women workers' (Adkins, 1995: 134). However, we must incorporate men into the subordinate axis of this sexual power relationship, albeit particular groups of men (namely those drawn from subordinate groups). Male customers are able to make appeals to higher status, not only on the basis of masculinities, but also according to the power dynamic between customer and employee which acts to ensure the dominance of customers over workers. All workers, male and female, are ultimately subordinate to the customer (Korczynski, *et al*, 2000). Such organising logics can be problematic for individual men and masculinities and research has emerged which proposes that men may, in fact, find certain kinds of service work (especially types of work that are 'female-concentrated') problematic.

### ***Service work as problematic for men***

More recently, research has focused on men entering and performing traditionally 'female jobs' or in 'female-concentrated' occupations. This work

suggests that such occupations pose problems for men in relation to negotiating their masculine identities. Lupton (2006) has analysed men in non-traditional occupations, drawing on a number of theoretical resources to interrogate previous accounts of men's entry into female-concentrated occupations. The first theory he draws our attention to is that of Jacobs (1993). Seeing men's entry into female-dominated occupations as mediated by a 'revolving door', Jacobs suggests that the desire of individual men to work in female-dominated occupations wanes over time and that although the average number of men working in these occupations remains fairly stable over time, individual men move in and out of such jobs as they go through life. The second theory he considers is that developed by Williams and Villemez (1993) which he contrastingly calls the 'trap door' theory. Here the majority of men who enter female-dominated jobs were not there by choice and remain 'trapped' in this kind of work.

Lupton goes on to analyse the influence of class and ethnicity on male entry in female-dominated jobs. He suggests that if men enter female-concentrated occupations as a matter of consequence rather than choice, and if working in such occupations is considered a disadvantage for men, then we might expect that the factors usually associated with labour-market disadvantage (minority ethnic status, lower social class - and I would suggest youth also) would be disproportionately found amongst men in such occupations (Williams and Villemez, 1993; Lemkau, 1984; Kvande, 1998; Guerrier and Adib, 2000; Lupton, 2003). However, Lupton found paradoxically that:

*men from ethnic minorities and lower social class groups were more likely to express an aversion to female-concentrated work, but were also more likely to find themselves there. (2006: 109)*

Lupton narrows his focus empirically upon working class men and suggests that men from this social group are drawn to female-concentrated work for particular reasons and are excluded from higher-status and higher-paid jobs in certain ways. The first factor implies a level of choice over men's entry into female-concentrated jobs as they actively choose their occupations. Lupton found three features were important in directing the career choices of his respondents: job security; public sector employment and ability to pursue interests and commitments outside of work. In addition to this, he also found that the men in his study had restricted access to higher-status and higher-paid jobs.

In a similar study of men in occupations traditionally associated with women, Cross and Bagilhole (2002) found that many of the men found their careers problematic for them because of their gender. In particular, a large number of the men in their study had their sexuality questioned and even lied about their work or kept it secret through anxiety over what other men and women might think. They suggest that the men they investigated maintained a sense of their masculine identity through distancing themselves from female colleagues or reconstructing their masculinities in line with their non-traditional occupation. Cross and Bagilhole also found that many of the men they spoke to developed a 'traditional masculine culture' within their non-traditional careers. They did this through emphasising 'traditionally masculine' traits such as 'pride in one's work,

doing a proper *job*, having a *career*, being true to oneself, being assertive, being blatantly sexist' (2002: 219).

Similar findings have been documented in relation to traditionally 'subordinate masculinities' (Connell, 1995). In a study of male hairdressers Hockey and Robinson (2006) argue that despite their homosexuality, even the gay hairdressers they interviewed and observed stressed stereotypically masculine values associated with science and professional status.

All of this points to the fact that although men in female-concentrated occupations may find the work challenging to their masculinities, they still maintain a sense of their masculinity through being able to locate themselves within discourses of what counts as 'masculine' and through emphasising 'traditionally masculine' values.

Despite arguing for greater consideration and acceptance of the subordinate position experienced by male service workers, this is not an attempt to view the position of male and female employees in equal terms. The forms of subordination, sexualisation, harassment and exploitation of men and women workers can be similar, but subtle and dramatic differences can illustrate the need for caution when looking at such issues. Firstly, we must emphasise that women are subject to greater sexualisation than men. Only men in particular areas of the service sector are subject to forms of sexualisation and this can be diverse. Secondly, although men may be victims of sexual harassment, it is largely women who have to endure it on a more regular basis (Hughes & Tadic,

1998; Guerrier & Adib, 2000). The following section considers more closely, this existing research into sexual harassment and service work.

### **'Bonus Time?' – sexual harassment in service work**

At this point it is perhaps useful to direct attention to the ways in which organizations and service work can indirectly encourage sexual harassment. The processes of sexualisation have the potential for sexually scripting interactions between workers and customers. Williams (2003) when looking at the work performed by flight attendants found that three scripts were expected by service providers: friendliness, subservience and flirting. While women and men both flirt, it was more attached to women who were 'required to exhibit their sexual availability' (2003: 525). This, she claims had the effect of encouraging customers to sexually harass female staff. Williams agrees with Adkins that sexual harassment is secretly coded through the gendered nature of jobs themselves. Researchers, again highlight how the importance of sexual attractiveness for female employees focuses attention on them as 'sexual beings' and that the pressures placed upon workers to treat customers in a caring way indirectly encourages sexual harassment in the service workplace (Folgero & Fjeldstad, 1995).

Associated problems for workers who face sexual harassment revolve around issues of fear of reprisals by management and reluctance to 'cause a scene'. Researchers that have examined sexual harassment of workers found that employees become skilled at dealing with it when it occurs. Two general practices seem to be common – either playing along with it or strategically diffusing the situation thus giving the employee an opportunity to control the

situation as far as possible (Adkins, 1995; Hughes & Tadic, 1998). Other writers have even acknowledged a number of coping mechanisms (such as humour and detachment) employed by workers to make sexual harassment easier to deal with (Guerrier & Adib, 2000). Folgero & Fjeldstad (1995) identify five ways that workers make sense of and deal with sexual harassment. First of all, they found that workers often refused to identify specific forms of behaviour as sexual harassment, revealing a *reluctance to accept* it was something that happened to them, or indeed was a problem for them. Secondly, because of the *primacy granted to customers*, workers could never object to harassment for fear of disrupting the atmosphere of the setting for other clients and/or embarrassing the customer in question. This is symptomatic of the contemporary notion of the 'cult of the customer' whereby ideas of the 'sovereign' consumer structure organizational relations and service provision (DuGay & Salaman, 1992; DuGay, 1996). Thirdly, *fear of management*, meant that workers were unlikely to report harassment because they did not want to seem incapable of handling 'difficult' people. Fourth, some of the workers in their research saw their entire occupation as involving *roleplay*. Harassment they experienced was accepted as part of their job and if they went along with it, it usually went away. Finally, many used the specific *context* of the workplace and industry as a means of explaining harassment and their reactions to it. Most of the workers again saw harassment as a routine fact of their jobs and if they were harassed outside of the workplace setting, many suggested, they would take appropriate action. These last two explanations illustrate the importance of detachment as a means of coping with any unwanted attention.

However, the unwanted attention and sexual harassment can extend into the personal lives of workers when they leave the workplace setting. Hughes & Tadic (1998) underline how sexual harassment as part of the workplace experience has the potential to 'spill over' into the private lives of retail workers. One of the women in their study reported having a 'stalker' and a number of others cited situations where male customers who had sexually harassed them in the workplace would continue to do so by waiting for them after work or when they encountered each other in public at a later date. Perhaps the most insidious manifestation of this is the increasing demands placed upon employees by organizations. It has been documented that workers can be expected to continue performing their service role even when outside working hours (Hochschild, 1983; Williams, 2003). This is particularly prevalent when a 'high-level' of service is being offered. For instance, both Hochschild (1983) and Williams (2003) note how flight attendants in first class, when encountering passengers outside the workplace, are expected to refer to them using their names and remember personal information about them such as what kind of drinks they order. This is something that will be explored in the final section of this chapter but first I want to consider literature that examines the extent of organizational surveillance that employees are subject to as well as scope for resistance in service sector occupations.

### **Resistance and control**

This section looks at research that highlights control and surveillance within service sector occupations and the scope for resistance that exists in these settings. Focus is primarily upon how organizations exert control and carry out



surveillance before moving on to consider in greater depth the ways and means of employee resistance.

### ***Control and surveillance***

A number of authors have examined the techniques of control and surveillance exhibited by service organisations. The areas that will be explored here will include surveillance as a barrier to employee empowerment; management control through recruitment and multi-dimensional surveillance and control.

The first area I want to look at relates to control and surveillance as a major facet of service work and consequently a major hurdle to notions of employee autonomy and empowerment. Taylor (1998; 2002) argues that service work is often misrepresented as 'empowering' because of the overemphasis placed upon it as 'cultural work'. In earlier research into travel sales advisors, Taylor comments that there is a huge amount of surveillance in monitoring targets and calls. As such, he claims that there is serious neglect of the lack of economic and employee freedom that service workers have.

Alternatively, writers have suggested that control begins through processes of recruitment (Hochschild, 1983; Wouters, 1989; Leidner, 1993; Nickson et al, 2001; Sturdy and Fineman, 2001; Callaghan and Thompson, 2002). In this way recruiters select 'appropriate' candidates and so contour the workforce to suit their own needs. This structures the overall appearance and dispositions of any given workforce as 'inappropriate' people stand little chance of disrupting the current workplace setting.

This process of selecting 'appropriate' people however is only the beginning of the surveillance and control that workers are subjected to. Sturdy and Fineman (2001) point to the various strategies used by management to negotiate control and compliance. In particular they highlight how managers have 'skills' in bullying, manipulating, demanding and evading as tools to generate compliance through fear and anxiety but that they can also use other more subtle strategies. These rely upon managers using positive emotions such as flattery, positive reinforcement and consulting to get employees to do what they want. However, management do not appear to be the only source of control and surveillance in front-line service work. Seymour and Sandiford (2005) look at pubs and the emotion management of bar staff. They found that other factors (such as prior experiences, co-workers and customers) governed employees' actions and behaviour.

Although I would agree with all of these propositions and ultimately that control and surveillance is prolific among most service sector work, a number of researchers underline the scope for employee resistance to such surveillance techniques and the notion of the 'sovereign consumer' (DuGay and Salaman, 1992).

### ***Resistance***

Within the service work literature there have been many authors who have suggested that service settings and service work is unlikely to remain 'uncontested' or 'fixed' (Crang, 1997; Taylor, 1998; Sturdy, 2001; Wray-Bliss,

2001; Mulholland, 2004; Pettinger, 2005a; 2005b). Such work highlights the attempts and abilities of workers to display resistance in the service environment. This 'resistance' may be characterised through employee refusal to adhere to the organisation service/sales ethic, prescriptions dictating aesthetic labour or indeed to notions of customer sovereignty.

### *'Slammin'*

Mulholland (2004) examines employee resistance in an Irish call centre. She found that workers would often fake sales ('slammin'). This, she suggests reveals how workers can oppose control in the service setting and illuminates that front-line sales work present problems for management and open-up opportunities for resistance. Mulholland also found that the practice of 'slammin' was undertaken collectively by workers and that this formed the basis of covert and tacit solidarity against managerial 'offensives'. This solidarity was also displayed in forms of work avoidance.

### *'Scammin'*

Mulholland, found that 'scammin' – a term workers use to describe work avoidance, absenteeism, sickness, going AWOL and smoking during working hours – was also endemic among the workers in her study. Smoking in particular was an established custom and practice, providing an opportunity for an extra break, regardless whether people smoked or not, while ensuring that working patterns are broken up at regular intervals. Meeting up for a smoking break was also important for encouraging group solidarity as workers collectively engaged in discussions over training, staff shortages, poor pay,

excessive monitoring and pressure to meet targets. Mulholland argues that the 'distinguishing feature of these practices is the subtlety of the tacit alliances, as in the case of cheating, when workers stayed silent under questioning' (2004: 721).

### *'De-subordination'*

Although Mulholland's work is important in underlining the collective way that employees can 'resist' organisational goals, management directives or the doctrine of customer service, we can also usefully characterise the kind of practices she mentions through the concept of 'de-subordination'. In an article published thirty years ago Miliband uses the notion of 'de-subordination' to explore the way workers in various sectors react to inequality. Miliband argues that this 'process' occurs where subordination is most evident – the 'point of production' and involves workers attempting to 'mitigate, resist and transform the conditions of their subordination' (1978: 402). According to Miliband, de-subordination has a long history in relation to work and has been expressed in a variety of ways. However, he asserts that one of its most common forms is a 'refusal to do more than the minimum that is required, or less' (1978: 402). The utility of this concept lies in its applicability to various contexts while at the same time retaining a sense of the structural relations of power in the workplace and wider society. Miliband claims that de-subordination can be collective or individual, politically motivated or lack clear political aims, organised or chaotic. Yet despite this, the unifying feature of de-subordination, for Miliband, appears to be the 'rejection of the validity of one...or...multiple

subordinations' that are inherent to capitalist society and the capitalist workplace (1978: 402).

This notion of de-subordination therefore becomes a useful tool when considering 'resistance' in the workplace because it allows us to analyse workplace 'misbehaviour' or 'deviance' from a number of angles. In particular, a sense of structural power relations is clearly maintained alongside the often incoherent and contradictory nature of certain workplace behaviour. Ultimately, incorporating this concept into the investigation that follows will allow for an exploration of the ways in which workers display or practice 'resistance' or 'de-subordination' and whether it is collective, individual, coherent or confused.

### *Aesthetic challenge*

Pettinger (2005a) takes issue with the notion that aesthetic labourers must strictly adhere to the regulations over their appearance. She regularly saw workers who would add items to their uniforms or wear accessories that were not part of the dress code. Consequently she suggests that 'company-dictated aesthetic labour failed on occasion' (2005: 470).

### *Noble resistance? customer service as challenge*

Authors have also underlined the ability of workers to actually use the discourse of 'customer service' as a means to resist management focus on sales (Sturdy, 2001; Wray-Bliss, 2001). Wray-Bliss in particular emphasises the radical potential of the discourse of customer service in relation to employee challenges to management/organisational logics and goals.

*clerk's use of a discourse of 'customer service' may be represented as their construction of call centre labour as morally infused: as ordered around morally charged notions such as care, responsibility and service. Further, in so constructing themselves/their labour, the effect can be to destabilise the precarious amoral regularity of organisational control.*(2001: 52 – emphasis original)

In this way, Wray-Bliss argues that the discourse of 'customer service', rather than being a source of subordination can actually pose a radical political challenge to the call centre and its organising logics. This appears to be a fairly noble characterisation of service worker resistance. However, service workers also directly challenge the discourse of customer service when they are frustrated and angry at abusive or irate customers.

### *Not-so-noble resistance*

This is perhaps one of the more amusing and interesting elements of resistance found among service workers. Being rude to customers, refusing to serve them, causing embarrassment etc. must be staged, managed and performed in appropriate ways in order to remain hidden from the extensive processes of surveillance and disguised through ambiguous comments or 'accidents'.

Rafaeli and Sutton found among the supermarket checkout operators in their study that they could display 'components of good cheer' but remained

'generally insulting throughout the conversation' (1990: 629). Taylor (1998) documents how the travel sales advisor's he investigated claimed to be able to ascertain when they were being directly supervised. This meant that on occasion they could freely disconnect calls from customers that were rude, ignorant or even in cases where workers simply took a dislike to them. In addition, Taylor observed that 'Two-fingered salutes and the mouthing of obscenities to the telephone, or the rolling of eyes to colleagues when in conversation with passengers' were also commonplace (1998: 96). Another very common practice was the limiting of information given to an ignorant or offensive caller. In this way, relevant and important information would be withheld from particular customers. Similarly, Taylor also found that a related practice included talking to certain customers (or those who were 'enquiring' rather than 'buying') in a 'distant' or 'disinterested' manner (1998: 96).

Hochschild captures perfectly the 'occasional escapee' who 'launders her anger, disguises it in mock courtesy, and serves it up with flair':

*There was one time when I finally decided that somebody had it coming...it was a woman who complained about absolutely everything. I told her in my prettiest voice, "We're doing our best for you. I'm sorry you aren't happy with the flight time. I'm sorry you aren't happy with our service." She went on and on about how terrible the food was, how bad the flight attendants were, how bad her seat was. Then she began yelling at me and a co-worker friend, who happened to be black. "You nigger bitch!" she said. Well, that did it. I told my friend not to waste her pain.*

*This lady asked for one more Bloody Mary. I fixed the drink, put it on a tray, and when I got to her seat, my toe somehow found a piece of carpet and I tripped – and that Bloody Mary hit that white pants suit! (Flight Attendant, Hochschild, 1983: 114)*

Such instances of 'sweet revenge' have to be carefully managed because although they can provide a great source of satisfaction and stress-relief for frustrated and angry service workers, this behaviour can result in sanction and dismissal. The way workers characterise 'problem' customers and react to them was something that I was keen to investigate and consequently provides one of the areas of focus in chapter five. However, one of the other main areas that I focus on in the penultimate chapter – work 'escaping' the workplace – remains unexplored in the service labour literature. Some research does briefly touch upon the filtering of work into leisure activities and this will be the source of discussion in this next section.

### **The 'fluidity' of service work**

Research into the blurred boundaries between work and leisure is scant. Some service work researchers have touched upon the fact that workers can find themselves still 'working' even after finishing a shift (Hochschild, 1983; Hughes and Tadic, 1998; Tyler and Taylor, 1998; Abiala, 2000; Guerrier and Adib, 2004). Yet these authors generally fail to follow-up these findings (the exception being Guerrier and Adib, 2004 who do at least focus on this phenomenon to an extent). More recently, Glucksmann (2005) engages theoretically with notions of 'work' and 'non-work' coming to the conclusion that there are many occasions



and instances whereby work and leisure or work and non-work 'filter' into each other. Glucksmann's ideas form the basis of greater discussion in chapter six. Discussion here will delve into the research of previous authors in order to excavate empirical research into service work that has documented that service work 'escapes' the workplace setting.

Previous work into flight attendants has highlighted that work can 'spill' into the lives of workers outside of the workplace setting when encounters with customers occur. Both Hochschild (1983) and Tyler and Taylor, (1998) indicate that Flight Attendants carry on their emotional labour performances when they meet customers outside of work. This is further compounded by the fact Flight Attendants working in first-class are encouraged to remember passenger's names and drink/food preferences. This level of 'intimate' emotional labour exacerbates the need for workers to continue with their emotional labour performances when chance encounters with customers occur. However, given the nature of flying and travel, such instances are presented as 'chance' occurrences and specific to first-class cabin crew.

In contrast to the image presented above, Abiala (2000) suggests that work 'escaping' the setting of the workplace can be a common occurrence depending upon the kind of service work that someone performs. In particular she notes how those involved in 'persuasive selling' commonly experience contact with customers after work. More specifically, the data she produces shows that 25% of shop assistants and around 40% of customer service providers and salesmen 'often/sometimes' experience contact with customers outside of work.

Yet Abiala fails to provide anywhere near an adequate explanation for these results. Where she does attempt an explanation she focuses only on the trend for salesmen to sometimes 'entertain' customers in the evening. The precise character of this 'entertaining' is left unstated and unexplored. In the case of customer service providers and shop assistants, no explanation is offered at all. Although it is useful to see empirical work incorporating these issues we need to provide more comprehensive explanations as to how, why and in what form interaction between workers and customers occurs outside of work.

In contrast, Guerrier and Adib (2004) give greater consideration to the way work and non-work filter into each other for overseas tour reps. Although the context of this research appears to be quite specific – the role of tour rep straddling both work and leisure – we can nevertheless gain valuable insight into the way service 'work' can filter into employees' leisure time and activities. Guerrier and Adib highlight how the role of a tour rep transcends the boundaries between work and play. In particular they point to the fact that holiday reps are seen as 'stars' and entertainers but also how drinking alcohol, relationships with guests and having a good time become integrated into work-based performances. Attention is drawn to the fact that a worker's ability to 'have a laugh' becomes commodified by holiday organisations and sold as 'good service'.

In addition to this, Guerrier and Adib also consider the extent to which the work-based performances of tour reps are gendered. They illustrate that male reps are 'portrayed in laddish terms' in relation to their drinking and sexual liaisons

with guests whereas female reps emphasise the provision of emotional labour and refrain from sexual relationships with guests.

Such empirical work is vital for understanding the social relations of service work where work/leisure filter into each and where worker/customer contact is prevalent outside of the 'workplace'. One of the aims of this research is to further highlight how work can become 'mobile' as it transcends the workplace they manipulate/deal with them.

### **Summary**

The literature review presented here has considered some of the main themes relating to the issues that undergo exploration in the following chapters. The approach to service work that I have adopted aims to bring together the concepts of aesthetic labour and sexual servicing in order to gain greater understanding of the way certain front-line service jobs remain specifically gendered. In particular I am keen to analyse the extent to which gendered aesthetics contour the everyday experiences of fashion retail workers as they commodify and exchange their gendered and 'fashionable' identities.

The volume of research into gender and service work has been underlined. This has expanded in recent years as academic interest has sought to examine the experiences of men in changing labour markets. Yet this continues to neglect male service workers and their aesthetic labour performances. Where attention has focused on men in service work (or 'female-concentrated' occupations) the

themes emerging suggest that men and women are either completely different sorts of workers, similar but different, or even that men find such occupations problematic. However, it is also argued that men in such occupations will find ways to reinforce their masculinities through adhering to 'traditionally male' values. Consequently some of the main questions throughout the thesis concern the extent to which men and women perform aesthetic labour in similar/different ways and whether men do in fact face and deal with challenges to their gendered identities within this particular environment.

In addition to these issues, academic interest has also led to a proliferation of writing over the extent of surveillance and resistance in service work settings. This is useful for considering how far employees can challenge discourses about the 'sovereign consumer' and organizational monitoring. The literature considered here has illustrated that organizational surveillance can be extensive but also that workers do have scope to challenge organizational logic, as well as their subordinate position in relation to 'the customer'. However, we still need to unravel how workers perceive customers and whether in fact they do subscribe to notions of the 'sovereign consumer'. A further feature of this work is therefore to build upon the existing literature by exploring how the workers in this study conceptualise customers, how they 'manage' surveillance and also the practices and strategies of resistance/de-subordination they engage in when dealing with 'problem' customers.

Finally, attention has been drawn to the fact that some workers experience contact with customers outside of the workplace. Research in relation to this

phenomenon has hinted at the prevalence of these situations and what happens when they occur but rarely is any adequate explanation or consideration offered. Consequently this also provides area for focus here as the social relations of certain service occupations lead to aesthetic labour 'escaping' the workplace as employees continue with their labour performances outside of work. We need to understand what are the contexts which facilitate such occurrences and why this is the case. Similarly we need to examine how workers feel about this 'intrusion' into their private lives and their motivations/anxieties for continuing with their labour.

## Notes:

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<sup>1</sup> DuGay defines an enterprise culture as 'one in which certain enterprising qualities – such as self-reliance, personal responsibility, boldness and a willingness to take risks in the pursuit of goals – are regarded as human virtues and promoted as such. (1996: 56).'

<sup>2</sup> 'McJobs' have been defined as 'low-skilled, low-paid service sector jobs' – Lindsay & McQuaid (2004), or more particularly as 'A low-pay, low-prestige, low-dignity, low-benefit, no future job in the service sector. Frequently considered a satisfying career choice by people who have never held one' Coupland (1992).

<sup>3</sup> Research has even extended the use of 'aesthetic labour' beyond service work to consider work in 'the Arts' such as among female performers (Dean, 2005).

<sup>4</sup> Later she also adds (as an aside) that male workers are also involved in modelling the gendered clothing products but in focusing on ladieswear outlets and female workers, fails to adequately consider male workers in any great depth.

### **Chapter 3: Bringing Men Into 'Service'**

#### **Introduction**

Service work and retail have been traditionally viewed as 'women's work'. Yet this does not mean that only women have always and continue to exclusively work in this sector. Men have been present in these occupations, as managers, buyers, merchandisers, skilled technicians (e.g. tailors) selling particular commodities (e.g. cars or technology), or in certain departments/sectors that employ a more active sales ethic. There have been numerous studies examining gender and service work but these have almost exclusively focused on female workers. Although more recently attention has shifted towards looking at male workers in these jobs, the role of men as *gendered* service workers continues to be neglected. This and the next chapters will consider gender and sexuality in service work focusing upon men and male sexuality and how these influence the lives and experiences and opportunities of those under investigation.

Discussion in this chapter begins by examining the motivations for entering into a so-called 'female-concentrated' occupations<sup>1</sup>. Recently, the work of Lupton, (2006) has provided a useful analysis of men entering into such jobs and this will be contrasted with the responses of my research participants when asked why they chose to enter fashion retail. Although Lupton includes the situation of minority ethnic workers, I was unfortunately deprived of such possibilities through the exclusively white-British origins of the workers that formed the basis of my sample. My analysis highlights that fashion retail is an attractive and

viable option for young men who often lack the qualifications and experience required for their intended career path. Similarly, it appears to be an acceptable temporary solution until they decide what they want to do in terms of education, work and employment.

Attention then focuses upon the supposedly problematic relationship between masculinity and service work. Two themes seem to emerge from the current body of literature on men in service work. Firstly, that men and masculinities find such work 'risky', challenging or threatening because of its association with women (Segal, 1990; Cross & Bagilhole, 2002; Williams, 2003). In contrast, the second theme characterises men and masculinities as more resourceful and instead of being threatened by service work, they develop successful coping strategies (Lupton, 2006). These two themes are then considered with particular reference to two particular aspects of their work – cleaning and fashion. These two aspects can be seen as risks or resources. My analysis is rooted in workers' own reflections of cleaning and fashion and whether they see them as risk or resource. A further element became discernable as a resource for the men in maintaining their masculine identities – the need to sell and make targets. Although this was specific to 'Croft' and 'Mojo', this dimension of the work served as an added resource for these male workers as they were able to adhere more closely to hegemonic masculine values.

Having analysed the extent to which and whether men find working in this segment of the service sector problematic, discussion moves on to consider how gender remains influential in the employment process and continues to

structure management and worker perceptions of the skills and abilities of employees and colleagues. Data presented here highlight how although some men and women may be able to be flexible in their gendered work-based performances, their behaviour remains structured according to gendered norms. Nevertheless, resistance and contradictions are present in the behaviour and attitudes of staff. Attention will focus upon the practice of 'bitching' among workers and the construction of male workers as wild. These examples illustrate that men and women can both be 'bitches' and 'wild', but that categories of immanence control the free expression of these activities based upon gender. Discussion will then shift towards the ways in which certain work tasks remain gendered and how the act of selling reveals both male and female workers exchange their identities as part of the product being sold. This latter point directly challenges notions that only female workers are expected to sell themselves as part of commodity exchange.

### **Window shopping: work orientation and hegemony**

Previous research has found that men can avoid unfair treatment by female superiors (Williams, 1995), are 'fast-tracked' by senior managers, male and female (Allan, 1993; Benton DeCorse and Vogtle, 1997) and enjoy the privileges of re-evaluation of work that happens when they, rather than women, undertake it (Pringle, 1988, 1993).

From my participants there was no real aversion to this retail work and certainly none based on traditional notions of male and female occupations<sup>2</sup>. This could be in large part due to the sheer volume of part time workers who were



simultaneously studying in further or higher education, but also because the retailers that I selected all broadly recruited employees according to middle class aesthetics. Workers had to be able to dress and speak appropriately which meant displaying the 'correct' cultural capital. This translated into wearing the 'right' clothes in the 'right way' and that despite the regional accent, distinctions were made between those who were well-spoken and people who spoke with a 'common twang'. Consequently all workers were drawn from particular classed social groupings. In addition, the men that I spoke to also claimed that they actively sought employment in this sector and that fashion retail was attractive to them as well as something they could easily get into as a result of their aesthetic capital.

**Gavin (sales asst, 'Mojo'): I chose to apply here cos like the image of the shop and stuff its more close to what I'd normally wear, I mean not exactly, but I can say I definitely prefer working here than I would say somewhere like 'Hotshot' (a high street retailer)...the brands are more me...**

**Phil (sales asst, 'Mojo'): I think it was fairly easy to get into, you've just got to be trendy to get your foot in the door...**

**Sean (sales asst, 'Croft'): I applied to clothes shops and music shops too, just cos its what I'm into, retail can be crap hours and pay but you get to be around stuff you're interested in all day...here I get to see the clothes before anyone else and try stuff on and I like**

**that...Its my first job and loads of other jobs would've wanted qualifications or experience well I haven't got that yet...**

**Anthony (sales asst, 'Legend'): I just wanted to get into fashion retail, out of other shops it was more attractive...I could never work in a supermarket or like a candle shop or 'Pricebeaters' or something...that'd be shit...I knew there wouldn't be the amount of tests and stuff like say for other jobs and the main part is *looking* the part...(emphasis his)**

These comments highlight the fact that male retail workers actively sought employment in fashion retail and found it more appealing than other occupations or retail sectors. Clearly an attraction to working with fashion, life stage and particular dispositions were crucial factors affecting these men and their job applications. An important element to underline is the ease through which these men found entry into their occupations. Anthony, Sean and Phil all underline this as a major attraction to fashion retail and this is perhaps reflected in the relatively young demographic that fashion retail tends to attract. Because of their particular circumstances all of these men found an easy route into fashion retail<sup>3</sup>. As we will see later this entry was facilitated through their possessing one key asset – aesthetic capital.

In addition to the fact these jobs were easy for the men here to get into, they were also attractive because they were congruent with their interests and dispositions. These men were interested in fashion and associated industries

such as music and entertainment. Their jobs reflect who they are as *individuals*. All of the men above outline that being interested in fashion or being 'trendy' is part of who they are. Similarly, retail appears to be stratified horizontally and vertically in terms of its appeal. Anthony claims that he wanted to be in fashion retail and that he couldn't work in a supermarket or 'Pricebeaters'. Here fashion retail holds a certain amount of status for Anthony as opposed to other retail sectors. In addition, Gavin underlines the stratification within the fashion retail sector, claiming that the brands sold at 'Mojo' reflect his own tastes more closely than other fashion retailers. This statement suggests that some workers express a preference for particular retailers in line with their own tastes and dispositions. Consequently different sorts of people will be attracted to different retailers and this can then lead to an informal status hierarchy between similar retailers.

These issues all point towards men actively seeking and being attracted to fashion retail and particular shops. However, much of this attraction is based on ease of entry given their lack of qualifications and experience at that stage of their lives. The comments made above indicate that both the 'revolving door' (Jacobs, 1993) and 'trap door' (Williams & Villemez, 1993) notions could be accurate reflections of these men's entry into fashion retail. Although the men I interviewed had all studied or were studying in further/higher education, they felt that fashion retail was an easy occupation for them to get into. They felt that other jobs wanted more than they could offer either in terms of qualifications or experience. In this way, it is easy to see retail as a 'trap door'.

However, none of these men saw themselves as being 'trapped'. They saw their entry into these jobs as more to do with individual choice and circumstance. In the early stages of marking out their career trajectories, these men found themselves jobs that reflected their interests and avoided those that they thought were unsuitable or unattractive. Similarly, they had career goals that they intended to follow and either had some qualifications or were studying for them. This second point resonates with the 'revolving door' thesis as these men could move out of retail after gaining experience of work and/or qualifications. Consequently a tension arises in this instance when we end up relying on notions of 'doors' as characteristic of men's entry into fashion retail. These men are simultaneously 'contained' through circumstance and yet moving along a career trajectory. These are further influenced by the life stages of individual men not only in terms of choice of career at any given period of their lives, but also by their tastes and dispositions.

These points have illustrated that men actively seek out employment in fashion retail - a 'female-concentrated occupation' - because it suits their interests and circumstances. However, much of the literature proposes that men find working in such occupations challenging or problematic (Cross & Bagilhole, 2002; Williams, 2003; Guerrier & Adib, 2004). In response to this the following section will analyse how men cope in 'female-concentrated' or 'feminized' jobs, the potential risks to their masculinities and the resourcefulness of men in these jobs. In addition, I will consider the challenge that taking an interest in fashion and appearance poses for men and masculinities and illustrate how they

instead manage to mobilise their aesthetic capital for exchange in the labour market.

### **Masculinity and service work**

One of my research questions considered the extent to which emotional and aesthetic labour were available as resources for men, or indeed, whether using feelings, emotions and physical capital were problematic for men and masculinities. From the literature, two themes can be distinguished:

- service work is feminised, posing risks to men and masculinities
- individual men/masculinities can adapt or have sufficient resources at their disposal to sustain a coherent gendered identity.

Here I will consider each theme in relation to my own research and use examples to illustrate that service work and retail are generally unproblematic for men and masculinities (where problems do arise, these involve challenges to heterosexuality as well as masculinity and will be considered in the following chapter). In addition, I will argue that certain men and masculinities can be well-suited (and some cases crucial) to the work involved in fashion retail. In these cases, men actively use what capital they have to secure an occupation and subsequently retain it and perform effectively.

### ***'Risky' masculinities***

Although I realise the problems of grouping together theories under the umbrella term of 'service work', empirical and theoretical work has suggested

that this kind of work, and being employed in so-called 'feminised' occupations will pose risks to individual men and masculinities (Hearn and Parkin, 1987, Folgero and Fjelstad, 1995; Guerrier and Adib, 2000; Lupton 2006). Some researchers have even argued that 'hybrid' identities have emerged as 'traditional' or hegemonic masculinities have struggled to cope with social change towards consumer society (McDowell, 1995).

Some authors have highlighted that service work is feminized, and have pointed to the way that 'doing service work is "doing gender"' (Kerfoot and Korczynski, 2005: 391). Adkins goes even further, claiming that 'its not that jobs themselves require specific gender traits but are already gendered –i.e. "barmen" "waitress" '(1995: 110). She goes on to suggest that 'women are employed because of what they are *as women*, this is not the same for men.' (1995: 112. Original emphasis). However, my data do not support this. As we will see, men were hired precisely for what they are *as men* and I will return to this later.

But why are men increasingly seeking employment in service occupations? The simple answer is that we now live in a service-based economy and we have seen a dramatic shift in regional employment patterns. The traditional 'male' industries that had such a crucial place in North Eastern life have been replaced with service sector jobs. Research indicates that despite the low wages generally assigned to 'women's work', men continue to 'infiltrate' these jobs as a result of the decline in traditional 'male' skilled and unskilled jobs (Bradley, 1993; Cross and Bagilhole, 2002). This is reinforced by the comments

of the workers earlier that they felt fashion retail was something that they could easily get into. Therefore, we need to analyse just how risky working in a feminised occupation can be for men and masculinities, particularly in geographic areas that have undergone rapid social change.

### *Status, femininity and masculinity*

One of the main risks towards masculine identity lies in becoming proximate to the feminine or femininity. And in this we not only see how men working in traditionally feminine occupations can be seen as 'feminine', but also how this is then reflected in the relatively low status of many service sector jobs.

Folgero and Fjelstad (1995) underline how the supposed femininity of male service workers is clearly illustrated by the way they are frequently imagined to be gay (e.g. waiters, hairdressers). Others have proposed that male homosexuals are seen as 'caricatures of women' (Nungesser 1983). Such propositions are rooted in the binary gender system as 'to be unmasculine means to be feminine' (Hopkins, 1996: 108). This can be seen as symptomatic of the low-status of service work and indicative of how severe the consequences of service work can be for men and masculinities: a 'feminine' man is 'stepping down', he is 'reduced' to the level of women (Hearn and Parkin, 1987). In their research into the hospitality industry, Guerrier and Adib (2000) also support this, arguing that subordinate status of male service workers is often reinforced by reference to their sexuality. The following sections outline the risks posed to the men in this study by two particular feminized aspects of their work – cleaning and fashion.

## *Cleaning*

If we look at the tasks involved in retail work as outlined by Pettinger (2006) we can further identify possible risks to male identity:

*...cleaning duties are similar to the domestic labour that has long been “women’s work” in the home, but transferred to the public sphere, with its gendered nature retained (Bradley, 1989)...cleaning grounds shop work as low status, low skilled and dirty as well as feminised. Unlike other cleaning workers, sales assistants do not have protective clothing, but wear their...outfits, producing a tension between the explicit work tasks and demands for ‘aesthetic labour’ (Witz et al, 2003) placed on workers, both of which are significant elements of the sales assistant’s role. (2006: 59)*

Here Pettinger is keen to balance out the aesthetics of retail work with the grimness of cleaning and tidying. She underlines the gendered nature of cleaning as well as the low status attached to work involving these activities. My data support this. Male workers were very keen to, and skilled at avoiding any form of cleaning duties, instead opting for the lesser evils of re-stocking, folding, visual merchandising etc.

**Lee (sales asst, ‘Legend’): yeah I hate the cleaning, we don’t have to do as much as other people I think because we have domestic staff that clean before opening, but like if kids spill drinks or food then**



**I'm not meant to do that, I'm meant to serve customers, that's the cleaners' job.**

**Arran (sales asst 'Mojo'): I'll clean if I'm doing the windows, but not just for cleaning's sake...**

**Phil (sales asst 'Mojo'): the cleaning is the worst for me, but you learn how to get out of it...keep busy...I'll start restocking, or moving the shopfloor...that way they [management] will pick someone who looks less busy than you to do the hoovering or mirrors and that.**

In terms of the gendered element of cleaning, the female workers I spoke to were less resistant to it. They found that particular aspect of the work unpleasant but necessary, or even took some level of pleasure in it:

**Jade (sales asst 'Croft'): I don't mind cleaning really, it's got to be done, I'm not breathing in days' worth of dust, you have to Hoover and polish otherwise it's just minging.**

**Jonelle (sales asst 'Mojo'): I don't like just random cleaning, but I love being able to get my section immaculate, you know, prove you've been there...I'm dead thorough, I take all the tops or jeans off, give it a real good polish, re-fold everything and arrange all the**

**point of sale (ads and promotional materials) all nicely so it's perfect...that way it's not just cleaning.**

If we look at the comment by Jonelle, we can see she elevates the act of cleaning in order to make it more interesting, define her purpose ('prove you've been there') and make her feel that it's not 'just cleaning'. The reality is, Jonelle is not simply cleaning here – she is in fact merchandising which can be a means of dressing-up dull or repetitive tasks and integrating them into more creative or technical competencies (another example I encountered was one manager who referred to straightening piles of folded tops and finger-spacing hanging items as 'standardising'). The importance of merchandising is not lost on higher levels of management. Good merchandising can increase profits and can therefore confer status. Many of the management I had spoken to highlighted their skills in merchandising and underlined how important it was, and similarly, where companies had specific visual merchandisers, management told me that they often had humble beginnings as sales assistants who demonstrated a particular flair for displaying products. In this way we can see that perhaps cleaning need not necessarily be seen as 'low-status' even though it may be feminized. Sales assistants such as Jonelle are able to transform the activity of cleaning into something that is more interesting and profitable in terms of pleasure and developing skills and abilities, and may even be able to mobilise this as a resource for exchange in the marketplace (i.e. promotion).

In addition to the gendered nature of the tasks involved such as cleaning and tidying, the men here may have also found these tasks created too much conflict with their aesthetic performances. We can see this explicitly through the division and separation that Lee from Legend makes between himself and other workers in the same environment: 'if kids spill drinks or food then I'm not meant to do that, I'm meant to serve customers, that's the cleaners' job.' Perhaps this can be read as an attempt by Lee to avoid any further 'downgrading'. He sees cleaning as dirty and the job of someone else. In comparison Lee values his aesthetic labour above practical aspects of his work such as maintaining a clean and tidy environment for consumption.

However, cleaning is not the only challenge that I wish to focus upon here. As we have seen, working in feminized jobs can be seen as problematic for men and this is compounded in this instance by the fact that the products (clothing) being sold can also be seen as 'feminine'.

### *fashion*

People's relationship towards clothing is highly personal, forming part of our embodied selves (Entwistle, 2000; Pettinger, 2005), as well as a signifier of social status, gender and social identities (Crane, 2000). However, it was not until the latter years of the twentieth century that academic interest in men and their relation to fashion began to blossom. Even so, this work has tended to focus on Flugel's notion of the Great Masculine Renunciation in which he argued that from the nineteenth century men abandoned fashion and adornment and opted for more sober attire and 'serious' pursuits (Flugel, 1930;

Wilson, 1985; Nava, 1992; Craik, 1994; Lury, 1996). However, more recently attention has focused upon providing a more intricate and developed account of men's fashion. This work suggests that 'men's fashion is as multiple and complex as the formations and constructions of masculinities to which it clearly relates' (Edwards, 2006: 109). This point has been echoed also in previous work (Edwards, 1997; Breward, 1999; Cole, 2000). Similarly, sociological analyses of the 'New Man' have also questioned any simple polarising of men and fashion (Chapman and Rutherford, 1988; Mort, 1996; Nixon, 1996).

Nevertheless, despite the multiple and complex nature of men's relationship with fashion, a common feature remains:

*fashionable, image-conscious or simply 'dressy' men are often seen to arouse anxieties in gendered as well as sexual terms, being perceived not only as potentially gay or sexually ambiguous but as somehow not fitting in...*(Edwards, 2006: 113)

Heterosexual men are exposed to risks working with fashion – they become further linked to the image of the 'dandy' and homosexual. Gay men are often associated with the fashion and beauty industry and this affects how men working in all levels of this industry are perceived (see for instance the character of John Inman on the TV programme *Are you being served?* and more recently *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*). Historically, men preoccupied by appearance, taste and fashionable living have been contentious figures. This becomes clear when we consider cultural notions and concerns over the



traditional figure of the 'dandy' (Moers, 1960; Wilson, 1985; Hollander, 1994; Mort, 1996; Nixon, 1996; Breward, 2006; Luckett, 2006). Breward looks at the development of the 'dandy' as a cultural figure through history linking each 'incarnation' to a more 'general crisis in the articulation of acceptable forms of masculine sexuality as represented through male bodies and their relationship to fashionable living' (2006: 223). This concern is still prevalent today:

**Arran (sales asst, 'Mojo'): yeah I get a bit of piss-taking from my mates...they think it's a bit poncey...but it's a job and I like it.**

**Paul (sales asst, 'Croft'): lads are lads aren't they...like after a few beers it normally starts or if one of them sees me wearing something a bit different or bright colours then its all like "you git big puff"...**

These remarks show that 'feminised jobs' threaten masculinity. In this particular case, the key threat is fashion and those policing masculinity are the 'mates' or 'lads' that these workers are friends with. Although this could be seen as a more insidious form of policing masculinity it is not taken too seriously by the workers in question. They brush it off as good humour between friends. Nevertheless, this does represent one of the ways that masculinity is informally policed among men even if it is done 'after a few beers' or through 'a bit of piss-taking' by 'mates'. Working with fashion, for men, remains a destabilising phenomenon, if not for the individual men in question, certainly for other men and masculinities. But paying attention to appearance and having an interest in fashion and style

are not 'risky' for these male workers, in fact, they are a resource, and one which is simultaneously appropriated by their respective organisations and used by themselves for their own benefit.

### ***'Resourceful' masculinities***

Men or masculinities can be seen as adaptable and flexible, able to 'claim their stylized acts as performances and to be their (self-disciplining) authors' (Adkins and Lury, 1999: 607) in a period of 'cultural feminization' (Adkins, 2002). In this way, how men negotiate challenges to their masculinities may reinforce the gender order rather than subvert it. Guerrier and Adib (2004) suggest that men doing 'women's work' may cope with any challenges by reconstructing the work in relation to hegemonic masculinities. As the feminization of an occupation results in its being deskilled, lowered in status and sexualized, so, it may be argued, men appropriating 'women's work' can modify and reconfigure its structure so as to maintain their privileged position (Tewksbury, 1993). This view is similarly held by Lupton (2006) as he identifies the strategies men use to do this. The first strategy that men use is to be careerist, emphasizing the career prospects rather than the job (with its gendered connotations), or even to disassociate themselves from the job altogether when outside the workplace (Williams, 1995). A second strategy is to identify with other more powerful male groups (Floge and Merrill, 1986, Morgan, 1992), for example male nurses associating with male doctors; seeking hegemonic masculinity by association. A third strategy is to represent the work as more 'masculine', even to the extent of re-titling the job to avoid the non-masculine associations (Pringle, 1993). This may go further and involve doing the job differently, prioritizing the more

'masculine' elements, for example the technical, physical or managerial aspects (Lupton, 2000; Williams, 1995). Seeking out 'masculine' specialities and avoiding 'feminine' ones may also form part of such a strategy (Williams, 1995). The challenge to sexuality may be dealt with by emphasizing one's heterosexuality (Morgan, 1992), or engaging in discourses that reinforce masculinity in relation to others, such as women and homosexual men (Barrett, 1996), or by 'impression management' (Thompson and McHugh, 1990), for example, through dress (Collier, 1998) (Lupton, 2006:107).

In comparison, Adkins and Lury (1999) suggest that men:

*may differentiate themselves from each other as workers because they are not hired or retained on the basis of being men but rather on the basis of what skills or resources they possess...this is not to deny, however, that, in an increasing range of occupations, there is now an emphasis on the presentation of aestheticized selves, for men as well as women. (1999: 605)*

Here Adkins and Lury provide a convincing account of the perpetuation of inequality in relation to gendered service work, and this certainly falls in line with my own analysis of how men avoid/transform cleaning work because of its low (feminized?) status.

### *The transmutation of cleaning*

Although we can see that Jonelle was able to transform her cleaning duties, male workers sought to avoid cleaning more than their female counterparts. Now when we look at Jonelle's comments, its possible men misrecognized the cleaning tasks they did carry out – take Arran's remark – 'I'll clean if I'm doing the windows but not for cleaning's sake'. He clearly does not see the value of cleanliness unless it is part of something bigger that can keep his interest such as 'doing the windows'. Again in this way he is like Jonelle because its not 'just cleaning' or for 'cleaning's sake'. Men were much more likely to transform cleaning into something else such as merchandising, organising or sorting. In this way they negotiated the risks to their identities and status as men by transforming the act of cleaning into something else.

The male workers I have spoken to and observed also treated other potential risks (i.e. the use of emotional and aesthetic labour) as resources. Men actively used the way they looked and their abilities to relate to people (but mainly other men) as resources. They used these to gain employment with their respective retailers, but also to retain employment.

### *Dedicated followers of fashion?*

Fashion and masculinity need not be homosexual bedfellows. Breward's work mentioned earlier asserts that the figure of the 'dandy' was not one-dimensional. Instead, he suggests that dandyism developed along two lines. The account given illustrates that the 'dandified' figure is a further



representation of men's mobility in relation to sexuality over varying historical contexts. By the 1820s Breward suggests that:

*the dandified body was able to refute accusations of effeminacy raised in satirical representations through recourse to its associations with a sporting virility personified in the pursuit of horse-racing, fencing, gambling, womanising and boxing.*(2006: 226).

In this way dandyism can be seen to develop along two lines. The two strands of dandified display – one associated with political, sexual and social resistance, the other with a commercial and corporeal engagement with the urban marketplace – ‘require careful unravelling if the defining features of the latter are not to be subsumed by the polemics of the former (Breward, 2006: 231).’ This is informative in describing alternative forms of dandyism and the potential for straight men or sexually conformist men to exhibit fashionable masculinity and a concern for taste and fashionable living. However, any straight man who is fashionable or ‘dressy’ runs the risk of being labelled homosexual as such characterisations are so closely connected with the sexually deviant dandy figure.

Guerrier and Adib (2004) argue that men could be attracted to work in feminized jobs so they can display a different masculinity. They contrast the traditional model of the male manager ‘dedicated (wedded?) to his job rather than to his gender or sexuality...grey, hardworking, corporate’ (Hearn and Parkin, 1987: 99) with the youthful, fashion-minded managers who wanted to work with

women that Alvesson (1998) found in his study of an advertising agency. This is a valid point but I want to make a distinction here. Alvesson's study of managers within an advertising agency looks more towards middle-class managerial masculinities working within a highly aestheticised work environment. My research looks at young men employed in the much less glamorous and lower-paid world of fashion retail. What investments do these men have in actively promoting their aesthetic capital and sense of style?

The men in this study did not find their interest in fashion and appearance posed any great challenge to their masculinity. Instead they used this as a resource, marketing themselves as fashionable and stylish and therefore helping to create the shop spaces and brands themselves as masculine, 'cool' and fashionable.

**Gavin (sales asst, 'Mojo'): guys like being served by other guys, like they listen to what you say looks good and what they should be trying on...you gotta look like you know what you're talking about though...if you look crap or like a dweeb then its not gonna work...**

**Dawn (Manager, 'Mojo'): he totally looked the part...there were other lads who were smart...in suits and things...they might have been good for the position...but he just turned up in some jeans and...this amazing *Diesel* jacket...I just looked and thought you're what I want customers to see as *our* image...I was desperate to keep him after Christmas...**

Clearly, 'Mojo' values male workers who are 'trendy' and 'look good'. This confers credibility to the store and brand as 'fashionable' and can give them a competitive edge in a saturated market. If we look again, being 'trendy' is not only desirable it's a *requirement*, Dawn says that '*everyone* in this store is trendy...you *have* to be...' Aesthetic capital was important for all of the men in the research, but the value attached to fashion sense and style was greatest in 'Mojo'. This can be explained by looking at the products 'Mojo' sells – designer labels rather than its own branded label. Within the one store there are competing aesthetics. Perhaps the appeal to greater credibility through embodying 'trendy' is necessary because of the greater uncertainty that people face when having to choose the 'right' labels. This is important because it illustrates how crucial aesthetic capital is for the opportunities of individual men and also in constructing the retail space as authentically stylish.

Like most jobs, those of the workers I researched were subject to a probationary period during which time they had to prove themselves in order to have their contract of employment renewed. At each retailer, any permanent member of staff could be put back on probation following unsatisfactory behaviour, failure to 'meet company standards' etc. Add to this the fact that many of the part-time workers held zero-hour contracts and at various times of year large numbers of staff are drafted in on temporary contracts, and it comes as no surprise workers are constantly aware of their lack of job security.

What became obvious was that looking good, fitting in with the aesthetic of the shop, and being able to relate to the customers and rest of the staff were crucial to retaining employment. Men and women were equally successful at doing this. Although most of the workers I interviewed and spoke to applied for many jobs in various service sectors (and even in other areas), fashion and entertainment retail were the most common feature of the jobs applied for. Among these, patterns emerged regarding aesthetics. Workers applied for jobs with retail organisations that they identified with, if only to a certain extent. Most workers regularly wore clothing or bought garments from their employers before they were given their jobs (and this again was heightened after enjoying the privileges of staff discount).

Previous work has shown the ability of women to use their aesthetic or feminine capital to gain employment (Hochschild, 1983; Adkins, 1995; Tyler & Taylor, 1998) but focus on men in this regard has been scant. In this case, men *were* able to mobilise their aesthetic capital to increase their chances of gaining employment. This is reflected in the comments below:

**Dawn (Manager, 'Mojo'): customers look and think well he's trendy he'll know...so if someone looks good and is trendy then they've got the edge over someone who just looks smart...everyone in this store is trendy...you have to be otherwise customers will look at you and think what the hell do they know...**

**Neil (sales asst, 'Mojo'):** for the interview, god, what was I wearing, I can't remember me exact outfit, but I know I wanted to look right, I thought trendy shop, they're not gonna wanna see me in some dry smart suit, I'd look like a schoolkid, so I thought about what they sold, I thought about what I'd seen the staff wearing there and copied it, just some jeans with rips in them, me *Diesel* trainers and like an *Old Glory* polo, cos they were dead big at the time.

**Jason (Manager, 'Legend'):**...If someone doesn't look like they'd shop here then you can't employ them really...

**Carl (sales asst, 'Legend'):** I wore my favourite *Ted Baker* shirt and tie for interview...to make me feel good but also because they're dead different and expensive...just to say look I've got style, taste, I'm an individual and I've got class...

All this points towards what Adkins and Lury are saying – that:

*whereas for women there is a normalization or a fixing of the labour of corporeality, these men may 'try on' and 'take off' various modes of corporeality. In this sense it seems that (some) men may be coming close to reaching the ideal of 'flexible' corporeality – a mode of corporeality which is adaptable, innovative continuously adjusting and adjustable in changing workplace environments. And as Martin (1994) has shown, such flexibility increasingly secures workplace rewards.*

*Indeed, while the ideal of the disembodied male worker may well be being displaced in service economies through men's performances of body work, it seems that a new ideal of flexible corporeality is emerging, one which, we suggest, can only be reached through a performative and mobile relation to corporeality. Such an ideal however is one from which many women workers are likely to be excluded. (1999: 607)*

But why do Adkins and Lury so firmly believe that women are excluded from this mobile relation to corporeality in comparison to men? They argue that men are 'better placed' to become the subjects of this new regime and that women are more likely to be the 'objects of self-accumulation, that is their identity is (often) part of the product or service of this new regime (1999: 612)'. However, this is also true of male employees. They were hired precisely because they were male. Their masculinity helped to create a masculine space for male consumption, contributed to the effective functioning of the sales team and helped to create and sustain the image of the store. Men are thus effectively selling their masculinity as an exchangeable commodity. The value attached to this commodity lies not only in being male, but also in how closely their masculinity meets the aesthetic of the store. In the case of 'Mojo' and 'Croft', male workers had to offer more than just their masculinity, they had to also offer 'cool', style and 'trendiness'.

In exchange for meeting their very strict criteria, fashionable and 'trendy' applicants who are successful getting jobs with 'Mojo' and 'Croft' enjoyed a relatively high income compared with those working in other establishments.

These shops are recruiting style, 'cool', youth, masculinity and femininity. So we can dispute Adkins and Lury's point that only women are likely to be objects than subjects because their identity becomes part of the product or service being sold (a point discussed more thoroughly in the next chapter). In addition, men did not enjoy complete autonomy in regard to their workplace performances of masculinity. Male workers who did not perform masculinity in line with the store aesthetic were seen as 'not outgoing enough' or 'too quiet'. This was applied in the same way to female workers. If workers refuse or are unable to perform in a way that the store visualises male and female workers to do so, then it is their personality (identity) that is seen as unsuitable. Consequently workers have to be able to relate to each other and customers in traditionally masculine and feminine ways. Failure to do so places workers under increasing scrutiny and can form the basis of dismissal.

Another way men were able to evade any threats to their masculinities was through being able draw upon traditionally masculine aspects of the work that were available to them. We have already seen this in the form of transforming cleaning into other activities or by avoiding particular cleaning duties. However, much more important, where the emphasis upon appearance was greatest (in 'Mojo' and 'Croft'), so too was the sales ethic.

### ***Sell, sell, sell!***

'Mojo' and 'Croft' both operated active sales policies, encouraging employees to 'create sales opportunities', drive the 'hard sell', and maximise profitability. Employee sales were closely monitored and high achievers were rewarded with

monthly bonuses. Other research has shown that proactive selling in customer-facing jobs is increasing and this is relevant because proactive selling jobs tend to be higher paid and undertaken mainly by men (McDonald and Sirianni, 1996; Regini et al, 2000). Research questions whether this development will lead to 'downgraded sales work dominated by women and more highly rewarded sales work dominated by men, or some tension-based mixture of the two?' (Regini et al, 2000: 394)

This is an interesting point. Certainly the workers I spoke to were more invested in their jobs when there was a more active approach to sales. Not only did this help the male workers to negotiate challenges to their masculinity being in a female occupation, but it also enabled them to maintain a level of interest and this was true not only for them, but also for female workers.

**Craig (sales asst, 'Croft'): the selling bit I suppose makes it more interesting, like its something you can really achieve at and looks good, in a way it makes it feel like its more important, like you're more active, achieving sales and meeting targets and stuff its...useful for other things...other better paid stuff I dunno...maybe car sales or something...**

**Phil (sales asst, 'Mojo'): its more of a man thing...grr..get sales, sell sell sell (laughs)**



**Greg (sales asst, 'Mojo'): the targets and that does mean you've got more pressure but I'd rather have that than just standing around looking pretty all day...that'd just be boring...**

**Gemma (sales asst, 'Mojo'): just to be like a decoration or like an ornament just doesn't appeal to me...there's only so much hair-twiddling you could do in a day...**

In this instance men were attracted to the sales-driven aspect of the work in certain shops and these retailers were able to hold onto more male staff. This work held the prospect of bonus for top sales assistants, was target-based and so more in keeping with hegemonic masculine attributes of the 'hard sell', ruthlessness, determination, competition etc. In addition we can see from Phil and Greg's comments that they see this as more active and masculine.

Notably, Greg suggests that the target-based aspect of his labour is more worthwhile than simply 'looking pretty all day'. The added dimension of having to meet targets and achieve sales is a further resource for men in establishing, maintaining and producing their masculinities along hegemonic lines in these workplaces. This leads to a situation where men working in fashion retail may become concentrated in such pro-active sales environments. This does not mean that men will exclusively dominate this market segment. The sales-driven aspect of their work can be equally appealing for female workers as Gemma indicates. In her comment, Gemma highlights that a purely aesthetic labour (being an 'ornament') would be boring for her, and as we shall see managers

still recruit and artificially manufacture their sales team on the basis of the heterosexual imperative.

### **Gaining employment – (un)equal opportunities?**

A great deal of research has been carried out into the gendering of jobs and sexual discrimination in the job market. Despite equal opportunities policy and feminism, discrimination based on gender is still rife. What is even more interesting is that it occurs in a highly feminised occupation, and that it is based upon cultural myths and societal stereotypes concerning gendered skills and the abilities of men and women. The managers of all 3 stores openly admitted to gender bias when going through the recruitment process:

**Dawn (Manager, 'Mojo'): you have to have the right balance...I think a 50:50 split works best... then the lads keep the girls in check and the girls keep the lads in check...lads get too loud and rowdy together...too many girls leads to a really bitchy atmosphere.**

**Kelli (Manager, 'Croft'): I dunno, I just like an even spread, it looks better and works better...lads just end up carrying on...and girls are just as bad but like, they'll just stand around gossiping about each other and the customers all day...**

**Jason (Manager, 'Legend'): I tend to look more for personality but yeah, if I need more male staff then I'll specifically look for a guy...too many women just doesn't work, no work gets done...it's**

**the same if I need a woman as well though...too many blokes leads to a laid back attitude and again nothing gets done...you have to get your mix right.**

Clearly each manager holds stereotypical views of people's ability to work based on gender and this has a very real effect on people's employment chances. We can discern from these quotes that the current gender makeup of the workforce influences the prospects of applicants. Alone, the gender of applicant was not an issue, none of the managers thought this was inherently 'women's work' or 'men's work'. They held stereotypical views of gendered characteristics of individuals, but this alone was not enough to make them discriminate. Instead discrimination was based on collective or team-working skills – too much of one gender was seen as detrimental. Here its not just the gender of the individual that is the issue, but what the team will 'look like'. Too many men would result in a masculine atmosphere erupting – rowdiness, insubordination, carrying on, practical jokes, vulgar behaviour, unsuitability for certain tasks (till work etc.). Too many women workers will lead to bitching, gossip, too much chatting, problems with heavy lifting, in-fighting etc.

These kinds of cultural stereotypes were seen to be reinforced through past experiences when the 'balance of power' shifted in the direction of one particular gender. Managers would recount stories of worst-case scenarios:

**Kelli (Manager, 'Croft'): It sounds stupid because like, I'm a woman and like I'm all for equal rights and everything, but its just a very**

**general thing you notice as a manager. Women can just stand and chat away, even when its all going crazy on the shopfloor, the world seems to pass them by while they yak away.**

**Jason (Manager, 'Legend'): I've had a mainly male environment before, everything more or less got done but at one point I had to start handing out warnings because they were playing football out the back, I've never had anything like that with the girls.**

**Dawn (Manager, 'Mojo'): we had a situation once where it was mainly all girls, we had a couple of lads but not enough, the shop just got a real reputation for being bitchy, one of the supervisor's friends came in and overheard some of the girls bitching about somebody and I wasn't happy about that but then I even had me bank manager say 'oh yeah its meant to be dead bitchy there', and this was meant to be like a formal meeting with him, that's when I realised something had to be done.**

Although many staff themselves held similar views to the managers, they pointed to the contradictions in what they were saying and I was able to observe these fairly easily. The following sections will outline some of these contradictions and how gender continues to structure the everyday labour experiences of workers through focusing on three areas: behaviour at work; work tasks and the act of selling.

### ***Behaviour at work.***

As illustrated each manager held stereotypical views about the gendered characteristics of their workers. Men were generally seen as more boisterous, more likely to question authority and be too talkative. They were often referred to as 'lads'. This characterisation of men as 'lads' is notable and the term itself can be linked with certain masculine attributes and behaviours such as hedonism, post/anti-feminism, concern with beer, football, sexual exploits and male friendship (Beynon, 2002; Benwell, 2003; Gill, 2003). Women were seen as more passive, but bitchy, the cause of in-fighting, less able to work together and like men, too talkative.

Again these factors were seen as a reason for a mixed workforce in an attempt to curtail and prevent particular gendered behaviours: women will only bitch with each other; men will only become boisterous around other men; and men and women have less to talk about with each other so won't spend all day chatting. Of course the reality is somewhat different. The following quotes examine the practice of 'bitching'. A 'bitch' is defined as a slang derogatory phrase used to describe a 'malicious, spiteful, or coarse woman (Collins Dictionary, 2004: 115).' Please note here the emphasis placed upon describing a *woman*. The practice of 'bitching' is similarly described as to 'behave (towards) in a spiteful manner (Collins Dictionary, 2004: 115).' This definition is an accurate description of the general form of behaviour that the workers grouped together under the phrase of 'bitching'. However this does not adequately express the form of behaviour that comprised 'bitching'. From my own observations and comments made by staff I would suggest that 'bitching' was made up of snide comments between

workers (either being 'bitchy' to each other or 'bitching' about someone else). This could also be applicable to certain facial gestures such as smiling or pulling certain faces. In addition to this, particular behaviour or acts could also be classed as 'bitchy'. Again this would usually involve some perceived malicious or spiteful intent but these acts could be highly variable given the situation. The female workers I spoke to did 'bitch' and freely admitted to it – but so did the male staff:

**Arran (sales asst, 'Mojo'):**...I like a good bitch, you can't help it sometimes when you see the state of some of the people who walk through the door.

**Phil (sales asst, 'Mojo'):** I suppose I bitch about customers quite a bit, especially if they've pissed me off, I'll bitch about them to someone, only like somewhere quiet though, behind their backs of course (laughs).

**Dominique (sales asst, 'Croft'):** yeah I bitch...some of the lads are the worst though, like once they get going they're worse than women are.

**Siobahn (sales asst, 'Mojo'):** oh I bitch about people all the time, and I'll bitch with anyone, if none of the lasses are up for it I'll bitch with one of the lads, in fact sometimes its more fun with them, they can find it funnier and join in more, sometimes girls don't like it or think that you're...well...a bitch (laughs).

**Jade (sales asst, 'Croft'): I'll only ever bitch with one of the blokes, they don't mind it as much, or like one of me close girlfriends, but I'd never do it in front of a girl I don't know *really* well, I don't want people thinking I'm really horrible.**

These comments are interesting because they indicate that men do engage in 'bitching' and openly admit to it. Although we could imagine that such behaviour would be 'risky' and align them with the feminine given the fact 'bitching' is defined quite clearly as a female trait, this is not the case. Instead, the men here are able to negotiate 'bitching' quite effectively without being attached to any negative stereotypes. Their female colleagues even suggest that 'some of the lads are the worst'. This successful negotiation of 'tricky' terrain is explained when we look at the latter two comments by Jade and Siobhan. These two women highlight that they need to be more aware of their 'bitching' behaviour and this is because their 'bitchiness' is already immanent as a consequence of their being women. In comparison, their male colleagues can bitch and get away with it freely because their position as men already excludes them from the category of being a bitch.

In a similar way, female workers were seen by management as chatty, but not loud in the way that male workers could be. This boisterous or loud behaviour was seen as most extreme when too many men were involved in a task or were present on the shopfloor on any particular shift. However, as with bitching, this was not the case. Men continued to be 'boisterous' when working with female

colleagues, and female workers behaved in similar ways when working together.

**Gemma (sales asst Mojo):** me and Arran used to have, like skateboard slalom races using the trolleys for the deliveries and empty crates and stuff for the course...dawn caught us once, we got a proper bollocking for that...

**Jade (sales asst, 'Croft'):** I like having a laugh with the lads, we have like playfights, and like throw things at each other...its just a bit of fun.

**Kate (sales asst, 'Mojo'):** we can be loud as well like, sometimes its like a bleeding Ann Summers' party in there [stockroom]...I heard the screams and the laughter right near the front [of the shop] one time.

Supervisors and management spent just as much time splitting up male and female colleagues for 'standing around gossiping' as they did two male or two female colleagues. This was something I not only observed, but which the employees commented on in the interviews:

**Kate (sales asst, 'Mojo'):** I'm always getting told to move away from people [other staff], lads or lasses

**Jade (sales asst, 'Croft'):** it seems like whenever I'm within 10 feet of another member of staff I get told to go back to my section.



**Lee (sales asst, 'Legend'):...some managers just don't let you talk to other team members**

**Arran (sales asst, 'Mojo'): she always tells me off for talking to Phil, but then...I always get told off for talking to anyone [staff]**

Previous research mirrors these findings. Taylor (2002) discovered that assumptions about the 'natural' abilities and 'personalities' of women and men are 'embedded' in managerial attempts to prescribe emotional labour (Taylor, 2002; Filby, 1992; Hughes and Tadic, 1998). Taylor found that male workers in his research could get away with things that the female workers could not if they were a 'good seller' (Taylor, 2002). However, my findings indicate that this was the case with both male and female workers. If a worker was a 'good seller' other 'deficiencies' could be overlooked.

**Dawn (Manager, 'Mojo'): Siobahn is a good seller and you need someone like that this time of year when its quiet...eventually she'll give me enough rope to hang her with, but I'll get rid of her when we don't need her sales...**

Culturally specific modes of femininity and masculinity (coded through sexuality) become disguised as having an 'outgoing personality' or being able to relate to people. What was described in many instances as 'outgoing' or 'bubbly' were in fact displays of 'traditional' femininity and masculinity. Workers who failed to perform according to these codes run the risk of being classified as 'not

outgoing enough' or 'quiet'. This would lead to further scrutiny and could jeopardise their position. This was especially the case with seasonal employees. Working zero hour contracts meant they could be drafted in quickly and have their employment terminated just as promptly. A phrase that was common among management to justify such treatment was to describe the employee in question as 'not meeting company standards'. Conversely, if workers could display an 'outgoing personality' through their sexualised interaction with customers, then any other 'failings' (such as missing sales targets, incorrect till use, tardiness etc.) could even be overlooked to a degree, or accepted and allowances made in various ways (i.e. offering more product knowledge training or customer service training to increase sales and help make targets, further till training, adjusting shift patterns etc.). This is reinforced by Pettinger (2006) as she documents how 'sociability' was a primary factor in deciding which contracts to renew or terminate.

Research suggests that this is symptomatic of 'women's work' or the labour of female workers (Adkins, 1995). However, I argue that this is also an aspect of the work carried out by men. This is not to say that men and women are gendered or sexualised in the same way, or perform the same gendered emotional and aesthetic labour, but that male and female service workers perform and sell their gender and sexualities as part of a commodity exchange.

### ***Work tasks***

On any given day it was possible for there to be a full rota of exclusively female or male staff. During my time in each store this did happen. And notably in each

case, the store managed to run the same as it did when the workforce was mixed. In 'Mojo' and 'Croft', the managers expressed a preference for female till-users. The reasoning behind this was based on the notion that women have a 'nicer manner about them', that they were better at cash handling and they could deal more effectively with customer returns.

**Kelli (Manager, 'Croft'): she's a lovely little thing...customers are less likely to turn nasty with her**

As a result of this there were more women trained as till-users, or, after training, the men would focus on other areas rather than the till. In all of the stores men could use the till. Policy in Legend meant that every member of staff received till training so as to provide appropriate staff cover at any given time. The men here were able to cope with the same demands placed upon the women when it came to working on the till. Similarly, in 'Mojo' and 'Croft', in each case men were called upon to use the till and managed perfectly well. The only real division I observed in terms of skill or competence was based on experience of using the till and whether the employee worked full-time or part-time (this latter division being linked to the first as part-timers generally took longer to learn how to use the till effectively as a result of their hours).

Similarly, men were seen as better at dealing with deliveries. This was as a result of their physical strength and efficiency:

**Kelli (Manager, 'Croft'): well you need to make sure you have one of the lads on shift for any heavy stuff that needs lifting...units and things.**

**Dawn (Manager, 'Mojo'): the lads are just better at the deliveries, they're quicker I think they just don't make as much of a meal of lifting the crates and boxes and organising it...**

However, when deliveries arrived, sometimes only female staff were available to deal with them. They may have found it more taxing to lift the heavy crates, but this was aided with the use of trolleys, elevators and other lifting equipment (which were themselves designed with the average man in mind and so not even designed for use by women, c.f. Cockburn, 1985). The stores generally managed to process the deliveries on time and where difficulties emerged it was due to shortage of staff or a larger than usual delivery. Sometimes this division of labour resulted in frustration:

**Neil (sales asst, 'Mojo') :...we tend to do more stuff in the stock room, and probably with deliveries, 'cos the crates are heavy and stuff, we just do it quicker so I suppose it's a bit unfair, I've said something before 'cos I was just sick. Like I prefer dealing with people rather than being stuck in the stockroom all day. And like the girls go on the till loads more than us.**

**Gemma (sales asst, 'Mojo'):** like I can lift all the crates, it might be harder than for a bloke, but I can do it, and like the trolleys and forklift thing make it easier... sometimes I just wanna hide in the stockroom tagging [garments] instead of being constantly on show...it isn't equal like, how Dawn usually picks the lads for it [deliveries].

**Craig (sales asst, 'Croft'):** I quite like the till its dead relaxed and, I dunno, I just like it but Kelli only ever puts me on when I'm the only till-user, that's crap, I don't like that, its not exactly sharing out the work is it when there's jobs for the lads and jobs for the lasses.

So we can see here how individual tasks become and are reproduced as gendered through the division of labour within the workplace. This division of labour is directed by management who assign individuals to certain tasks based on their gendered assumptions on the abilities and skills of men and women. Such discoveries illustrate that earlier research uncovering employer's perceptions of appropriate work for men and women is still applicable today (Chaney, 1981; Yeandle, 1984; Beechy and Perkins, 1986; Abbott, 2006). However individual exceptions to this were present. Managers admitted that certain male staff were more capable at jobs that they would normally assign to women, and vice versa. In addition, managers held opinions over the way staff could interact with customers based on gender. This translated onto the shopfloor in the way that staff made sales and served customers.

### ***Act of sales***

Gender had very real effects on the possibilities of interaction between staff and customers and subsequently guided these encounters. Gender was a major influence on forms of acknowledgement as customers enter the store or staff sections, the first few words of an 'approach', the techniques of persuasion used to drive a sale, the boundaries of personal space and social space within the store. These aspects governing the 'act of selling' are enabled, driven, guided and shaped by gender.

Men were required to sell the consumption space and the goods on offer as 'masculine'. In order to do this they needed to be able to interact with customers in masculine ways. This involved appealing to certain masculine attributes, sharing interests such as 'cool' music, going to the same clubs and bars, interest in sport and heterosexual relations with women. Pettinger (2006) has noted how 'sociability' is offered as part of the product in retail, but we must identify that this sociability is gendered in specific ways. An example of this was the gendered use of language restricting and enabling staff to engage in sociability.

One of the most important elements of customer service for employees in all the stores was how to approach customers, regardless of how aggressive the individual store's sales policy was. Generally this took the form of simply asking a customer if they were ok, if they were looking for something in particular etc. Something which I discovered in all the stores was the use of one particular

phrase: 'mate'. This phrase was completely gender specific – men used it, women did not and felt they could not:

**Kelly (sales asst, 'Croft'): its just different, like I smile at customers and ask if they're ok, but the guys can be all like 'are you alright there mate?', or...'are you looking for a size there mate'...its like they get to be dead matey with them straight away because they're blokes**

**Gemma (sales asst, 'Mojo'): listening to the lads serve, its all like, 'mate this...' and 'mate that...' and 'mate...', 'mate...', 'mate...'**

**Anthony (sales asst, 'Legend'): I went into 'Case' once and this lass was serving me on the jeans and she was like 'are them alright for you mate?', that felt weird cos like girls never call lads 'mate'...she was talking to me like she was a fella**

Here we can see gender restricting access to certain forms of sociability for women and also enabling particular forms for men. Men are seen as able to establish rapport or instant relationship on the basis of their shared masculinity and heterosexuality. This was exclusively available to them as men and we can see from what Anthony said that when a woman referred to him as 'mate' he felt uncomfortable, he felt 'weird'. We can see here that women are excluded from establishing close relationships in this way with male customers. In particular, we can see from Anthony's remarks that if women try to engage with men as a

'mate', they fail in the performance. This failure could be seen as symptomatic of the heterosexual imperative which precludes men and women having any form of close relationship that is not based on sexual attraction.

There was no comparable phrase that women used with other women either<sup>4</sup>. In addition, women were seen as more antagonistic with each other, many of the women spoke about the difficulties they experienced working on womenswear and contrasted that with generally amiable experiences they had working on menswear:

**Gemma (sales asst, 'Mojo'): women just are bitchy...there's not that bond that there is between guys**

**Jade (sales asst, 'Croft'): I prefer menswear it's not as bitchy...women can be really horrible to you...treat you like shit**

**Siobhan (sales asst, 'Mojo'): I can't be doing with all the bitching and gossiping and catty stuff...its nice working with men and dressing men...they're nicer customers...women are really difficult...**

These comments are illustrative of the perceived animosity and conflict between women. These female workers feel that men share a common bond in a way that women do not. However, this was not always supported by female worker's behaviour. They often shared close relationships with their female colleagues



and also had mainly female friends. Consequently, in this case, relations between women become problematic when a working relationship is involved and when this is a subordinate role.

However, such perceived animosity acts as a clear barrier to the female workers being able to establish rapport with their female customers. Men on the other hand, were capable of maintaining an advantage when approaching their customers (who were predominantly male). Male workers would attempt to consolidate this bond through language (in particular using the word 'mate'). Social structures governing gender make available and shape certain bodily cues and language thus shaping staff/customer interaction and the ability to make and close sales.

Another way in which gender served as an advantage to male staff was the way they could impinge upon the bodily boundaries of other men. The fitting room area was seen as an intimate area, a space where bodies would be in a state of undress and sometimes men would require assistance (checking for sizes – looking inside the rear of a pair of jeans that a customer is still wearing, men passing clothes to staff only in their underwear etc).

This meant that female staff would often feel uncomfortable on this section of the shop (not that they didn't enjoy looking at semi-clad men), but they felt this space was an area which was not for them, a space in which men could more effectively serve customers.

**Rachel (sales asst, 'Croft'): its not like I can just waltz into the fitting rooms and pull curtains open...I always feel dead uncomfortable around the fitting rooms, the lads can just walk in because they're lads as well, I always think it makes blokes feel uncomfortable as well if I have to take them a size, I often get one of the lads [staff] to take something in for me.**

This also made members of staff susceptible to losing sales in the more sales-oriented stores. This frequently happened to female workers. The converse was not true for men because they were not the initial point of contact when the situations were reversed. On womenswear, generally the staff were always female and so this closed off men's abilities to 'steal' sales from ladieswear customers, and also heightened the potential for competition and conflict between female sales assistants (and thus perpetuating the bitching and backstabbing).

However the discomfort arising from inhabiting the same space as semi-clad people of the other sex was something which was also experienced by the male staff when they had to cover the female fitting rooms. During my time in one shop, a male member of staff was accused of 'perving'.

**Arran (sales asst, 'Mojo'): this lass came into the ladies fitting rooms and her mam stayed outside, well I had to tag some stock and the we use the spare fitting room which is on the same side as the ladies...I was just going back and forth tagging stock and the**

**mam suddenly started shouting 'what are you doing?...stop looking at my daughter...' I was mortified because I was like 'I wasn't I was just tagging stock', it was horrible she really thought I was perving, what do you say when someone calls you a pervert say 'no I'm not'?...and anyway I could've been gay, she just assumed I was straight and that I was a perv...it was just such a horrible experience I had to call Dawn over, and then the manager and this woman are standing there debating how I was or was not a pervert, Dawn knew straight away I would never do that...she would have made me swap sections otherwise...I never go in the ladies' half I always send one of the lasses in...it was awful I had to stay there with this woman glaring at me for like 10 minutes until her daughter came out...I wouldn't care but, I never noticed when she went in, but on the way out the daughter had one of them skirts on which is basically just a large belt, you know the really high ones, and I was like that's more about you're daughter being a perv than me.**

We can see from the examples above that gender has an effect upon staff/customer interaction in terms of facilitating the development of rapport and relationships with customers and also in creating opportunities to 'scavenge' sales from other members of staff. Social space within the stores was also highly gendered restricting movement of staff.

## **Concluding remarks**

This chapter has focused on the gendered aesthetic and emotional labour of male retail workers in a region that has experienced rapid social change. We have seen how research proposes that female-dominated occupations can be potentially risky for individual men and masculinities. These risks include the low-status and low wages associated with traditionally 'female' jobs and challenges to masculinity and heterosexuality associated with the fashion industry. However, we have also seen the resourcefulness of men and masculinities. After the decline of traditionally 'male' jobs, we have seen how men are able to adapt to work defined as 'feminine'. My research has also highlighted that men actively use their aesthetic capital as a resource and do not find emotional and aesthetic labour problematic. This is interesting given the local context of the North East in which coalmining and shipbuilding were major industries and also markers of regional identity. This may be due to the adaptability and flexibility of masculinities as men can find alternative ways to reinforce masculinity i.e. through defining tasks and emphasising aspects of the job in line with hegemonic masculine attributes. In contrast, this may be a result of the growth of the middle classes and thus middle-class masculinities which have always been consumption-orientated (Edwards, 1997). What is apparent is that aesthetic labour *is* available as an exchangeable resource for men in the occupational marketplace. These retail workers used their masculinity, good looks and fashion sense to gain and sustain employment.

In addition, male retail workers also create the store as a masculine consumption space and contribute to the image of the store through their

aesthetic labour. Masculine identity becomes part of the 'product' being sold. This directly contradicts research that suggests only women's identities can be appropriated in such a way (Adkins, 1995; Adkins and Lury, 1999). The presence of men in the workplace setting is seen as crucial by management. In their eyes, men are needed not only to provide 'balance' to the workforce, but also to create their brand as simultaneously fashionable and masculine. Men actively exchange their aesthetic and emotional labour on this basis and at the same time also exchange their masculinity. This is then further 'packaged' and 'sold' to other men through their gendered aesthetic labour performances.

In terms of looking at differences between male and female emotional/aesthetic labour, we need to emphasise similarities in the process. Men and women both perform aesthetic and emotional labour, only what they exchange is essentially masculinity and femininity. For men this involves being able to communicate with men and sell in ways that appeal to hegemonic masculinity, but also remain flexible so to tailor approaches and sales techniques to suit particular men and also serve female customers. Women on the other hand provide a more sexualised form of labour on the basis of the heterosexual imperative. What women contribute to the workplace is their femininity. They make men feel comfortable, they give female advice – acting as sex objects and mother figures in a similar way to flight attendants (Hochschild, 1983; Williams, 2003). However, as we shall see in the following chapter, this does not always mean 'feminine' equals 'passive'.

I asked 'what makes a successful retail sales assistant?' I deal with this question more thoroughly in the chapter on customer service, however, a substantial proportion of this success is a result of 'doing gender' effectively. As we have seen, individual workers must conform to cultural norms governing masculinities and femininities otherwise they risk losing their jobs. How effective individual workers are at performing masculinities and femininities influences the skills and techniques of persuasion they develop. As men and women relate to each other in different ways, so too must male and female sales assistants rely on gendered forms of interaction and selling.

All of this suggests that scope for misbehaviour and resistance in relation to gendered norms would be minimal. This is true but resistance still exists. Sometimes this challenges cultural norms (as well as health and safety regulations!). Female workers actively engage in boisterous and disruptive behaviour and male workers routinely bitch with other members of staff. These may not represent massive challenges to the gender order, but they do indicate that the workers themselves misbehave and do not necessarily totally conform to cultural norms governing gendered behaviour.

### **Notes:**

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<sup>1</sup> I agree with Lupton (2006) here that the term 'female-concentrated' is preferable to 'female-dominated' as men may maintain privilege and dominance over women even when they are in the minority.

<sup>2</sup> Although negative feelings over pay and conditions did build up over time.

<sup>3</sup> Gav had left college at the age of 18 after studying a course in music; Phil was studying A-Levels at Sixth Form; Sean was studying for a degree at University; Anthony had left education after completing a HND in Marketing.

<sup>4</sup> Although 'honey' or 'babe' may be alternatives they were used as terms of endearment for close friends.

## **Chapter 4: Interrogating the 'product': sexuality and retail work**

### **Introduction**

This chapter analyses the ways in which workers are sexualised and how their sexuality becomes part of the product on offer. The data presented illustrate how workers at 'Legend' were sexualised in specific ways but underline that the process of sexualisation and the incorporation of the sexualities of workers as part of the product being sold is more pronounced in the pro-active sales environments of 'Mojo' and 'Croft'. Consequently, after an initial exploration of 'Legend' the chapter uses the former retailers and their workers as the focus of discussion. The concept of 'sexual servicing' developed by Adkins (1995) will be used to argue that both male and female workers sexually service customers. However, when the sexuality of workers and customers presents a myriad of possible interactions we are confronted with the need to refine what we mean by 'sexual servicing'. In this chapter I suggest that sexual servicing can be developed into three categories: heterosexual or normative sexual servicing; homosocial servicing and homosexual servicing. All three categories involve workers selling their sexuality (whether it be mobile or fixed) as part of the product of their labour.

Attention then focuses upon the way this servicing is used to form relationships with customers which are then exploited by the organisation and by individual sales assistants. Research has suggested that retailers are increasingly using 'relationship marketing' as an effective economic directive (Reynolds & Beatty, 1999). Having

considered this, I will then discuss how the sexualisation of workers places them at risk of sexual harassment. Using the data here I will argue that male workers are less skilled at dealing with sexual harassment than their female colleagues. This poses a direct challenge to their masculinity and is a significant problem when it occurs, as men find they have little experience or resources with which to draw upon.

The chapter then moves on to discuss whether the arguments presented indicate the possibility for transgressive or 'hybrid' gender identities in this setting. This will be refuted using the data here and drawing on arguments from the previous chapter to illustrate instead that men and women follow traditional hegemonic values. The notion of transgression and 'hybridity' is further refuted by the stigmatisation of particular identities and the fears that workers verbalised in terms of being 'misrecognised' as either homosexual or promiscuous.

Finally, as the overall theme of my research suggests, the commodification of workers' sexualities is not bound to workplace but becomes mobile in the service of the organisation. This will be discussed in more detail in the penultimate chapter of my thesis, but it is important to draw out the findings relevant to the material presented here. It will be argued that although workers' sexualities exist independently from their work-based performances, that the commodification of these sexualities leaves them open to further exploitation outside of the workplace. This is not to say that workers do



not have any agency in terms of their sexualities, but that the appropriation of them can continue outside of the workplace setting. The sexualisation of workers can even be a pleasurable phenomenon for workers as they can use the relationships developed and their relation to sexuality when serving customers to create possibilities for intimate relations with people they become attracted to.

### **Setting the scene: what's on offer?**

Sexuality was highly visible in the workplace through the behaviour of individual employees and customers, staff uniform requirements and specific selling techniques and practices. The sexualisation of workers was a key feature of this work environment in a similar way to that suggested by Adkins' (1995) research into employees in leisure industries. Adkins found that the appearance and product that was 'sold' served to produce a 'sexually commodified workforce' (1995: 133). She goes on to note that male and female workers were 'different kinds' of workers:

*the sexualized nature of women's work means that even when men and women work in the same occupation...men and women are different sorts of workers...women and only women must maintain an attractive, appealing appearance, smile, make customers feel good and respond to sexual advances and innuendoes. (1995: 141)*

Whilst it is true that the type of labour men and women perform is different, men in this occupation must also display the characteristics she mentions above. The main exception to this being that women must sell themselves as the objects of male sexual desire in a way that their male colleagues do not. Making some excellent arguments, Adkins states that:

*for women, their (sexual) 'selves' are produced through the relations of production and subject to appropriation. Men on the other hand, are not required to produce and maintain a particular sexual 'self' as part of their jobs and their sexual 'selves' are not the subject of appropriation. (1995: 153)*

The previous chapter has already illustrated that male sales assistants do in fact sell their masculinity as part of the product. In this chapter I will advance this by demonstrating that men's sexual selves *are* produced through the relations of production and they *are* subject to appropriation. Each of the retailers studied required their male workers to produce the consumption space as fashionable, but also as masculine. This involved them 'producing and maintaining a particular sexual 'self' as part of their jobs' and in fact, allowing their sexual 'selves' to be subject to appropriation by their respective organisations and also by their customers. The following section briefly outlines the ways in which the specific retailers sexualised their workforce, labour performances and consumption environment. This is necessary to

illustrate the overall processes of sexualisation before highlighting the need to develop Adkins' concept of sexual servicing and my own typology of 'sexual service'.

### **Shops and sex**

The level and type of sexualisation varied according to store, with the strongest and most blatant sexualisation of staff occurring in the most active sales environments of 'Mojo' and 'Croft'. 'Legend' stood in stark contrast to these retailers as the aesthetic labour demanded of workers was based around maintaining a formal and smart appearance without any drive to 'push' sales.

### ***'Legend'***

The way workers were sexualised in this store revolved around the aesthetic labour required of employees but also the architectural structuring of the store itself. Workers were required to dress in line with a 'traditionally smart' appearance which consisted of suits, shirts/blouses and ties/neck scarves with smart shoes. In this way, workers resembled any regular office worker. Sexualisation was observed through the hiring of staff (again looking good was an unstated job requirement) and the regulation over their appearance (men were expected to be fashionable but also stick to the traditional businessman aesthetic). For men, this allowed little scope for creativity with shirt-tie combinations and cuff-links providing the only available sources of flamboyance. In contrast women could choose any 'smart' variation of

jacket, skirt, shirt, dress, trouser combination and embellish their outfits with jewellery and accessories. The work itself was sexualised through the physical structure of the store. Unlike 'Croft' and 'Mojo' which both had open-plan shops, 'Legend' had separate floors for menswear and ladieswear. In the same way as both 'Croft' and 'Mojo', 'Legend' excluded male workers from the space of ladieswear and yet freely employed women to work on menswear. The rationale behind this was based on the heterosexual imperative and notions of propriety:

**Jason (Manager, 'Legend'): we just don't have any of the guys working down in ladieswear...its not really right...women aren't going to want men around there unless its like their husband or boyfriend...your women customers might be embarrassed to ask for a bigger size or like be afraid to buy underwear if there's men working down there...**

Here, Jason outlines that because of the intimate nature of the product (clothing), the only real 'legitimate' men in this environment are 'intimate others' - husbands and boyfriends. This indicates how the assumed heterosexuality of both male workers and female customers governs not only the distribution of staff throughout the shop, but also the hiring practices of management, as enough female workers are needed to work the ladieswear department. Perhaps this is even more marked out in this environment as a result of the aesthetic regulations over

appearance (forcing men to look like businessmen), but also by the sales and customer service ethic in Legend.

The relationship between worker and customer in 'Legend' is much more formal than in either 'Croft' or 'Mojo'. This is heightened by the fact that workers are required to wear formal attire in line with the store aesthetic. As workers look more formal it is likely that 'sensitive' questions (i.e. asking for a bigger size or about underwear) become even more problematic for customers to ask. However, compared to 'Croft' and 'Mojo', workers at 'Legend' received virtually no product-knowledge training and were not expected to actively chase sales. Contact between customer and worker was, in fact, kept to a minimum. In this way there is less need to be so divisive in terms of the gendered composition of staff in either menswear or ladieswear. If we consider that the reasoning behind excluding men from ladieswear lies in the assumption women do not want men knowing their size, or see them buying underwear, then we should expect to see less rigidity in a shop that essentially requires workers to enable self-service. Therefore, the true power of the heterosexual imperative is revealed through its structuring of the labour and distribution of male employees.

### ***'Croft' and 'Mojo'***

The aesthetic labour of 'Legend' workers requires them to embody particular masculinities and femininities and simultaneously creates the consumption space according to a particular organisation aesthetic. This

process is also apparent in both 'Croft' and 'Mojo', but this is more complex given their differing approaches to customer service and achieving sales. These stores used their active sales ethic, customer service and product knowledge training as part of an overall brand strategy to gain a competitive edge in the marketplace. These factors led to staff and the labour they performed being sexualised in similar, but also different, ways to their counterparts at Legend. This was more marked in the selection of employees to meet the store aesthetic and their potential as sellers, but also in staff behaviour and how they used sexuality and homosociality as a resource to meet targets. Such preferences were relevant to how managers selected male and female workers and how staff sold their own sexuality and that of their co-workers. All workers were chosen on the basis of their looks and fashion consciousness. However, the fundamental difference was that managers hired women that men would want, and hired men that other men would want to be like, or would trust in terms of fashion choices. In an environment where men made up the majority of customers and in an area with a thriving gay scene, this meant that men could also be seen as sex objects by gay men. Even though gay women were regular customers on menswear departments, selling sexuality to them was not a consideration. The main emphasis was appealing to men and hiring attractive and fashionable staff was a shrewd attempt to attract a wide market of male consumers. It is worth noting however, that as well as being attractive, and fashionable, workers also had to perform heterosexuality or homosociality effectively. Employees who were too

shy, quiet or did not have conventionally 'young' interests (i.e. not into fashion, sport, music, drinking, socialising etc.) would often find themselves excluded or sacked. This was due to their being seen as poor sellers or not fitting in. Generally, 'inappropriate' people would be sifted-out of the selection process or not be kept on after the initial trial/probationary period. These issues point to the need for further elaboration of Adkins' initial definition of sexual servicing and this provides the focus in the following section.

### **Sexual servicing revised**

Adkins' original notions of 'sexual servicing', although useful, fail to adequately explore the depth of worker experiences in terms of incorporating their sexualities in a sales environment. If we turn to the notion of aesthetic labour we find a similar limitation. Although very useful in analysing the labour of employees in the 'new style industries', the concept of aesthetic labour fails to successfully locate the labour of workers or the 'aesthetic' aspect of their labour as rooted in wider social structures governing what is 'attractive', 'sexy' or 'good-looking'. These social structures are heteronormative, thus revealing 'aesthetic labour' as inevitably underpinned by conventionally heterosexual norms of attractiveness. These norms are complicated because they allow for the inclusion of certain homosexualities and exclusion of others. My research suggests a greater fusion of the concepts of sexual servicing and aesthetic labour. This integration suggests that three categories of sexual servicing were apparent for male and female workers. These

categories include heterosexual/normative sexual servicing; homosocial servicing and homosexual servicing. These categories have been developed to describe the multi-dimensional nature of sexually commodified labour in particular 'aesthetic' industries such as pro-active fashion retailers or other sales-focused environments. All categories have been applied to both male and female workers and where available experiences of gay workers and customers.

### ***Heterosexual/normative sexual servicing***

As outlined, both men and women sell their sexuality as part of their aesthetic labour performances. This form of sexual servicing is characteristic of the normative or heterosexual forms of 'sexual service' provided by male and female workers. The most obvious (and prevalent) example of this was provided by the labour of female workers.

#### ***The female offensive.***

Flirting and selling sexuality were routine practices among the workers I observed and interviewed. This was most prominent where staff had to meet sales targets. When asked about this, staff would usually laugh or feel slightly embarrassed, this was because it was a source of amusement for them or made them feel guilty in some way. Flirting as a sales technique predominantly occurred between female sales assistants and male customers (sometimes this would involve male customers – plural, when a group of men were shopping together). The



female staff in general thought this was a bit of a joke, but emphasised how important it could be for them:

**Dominique (sales asst, 'Croft'): (laughs)oh my god!...yeah I flirt with guys...you just give them a little smile...look a certain way (laughs)...its shocking how gullible they are...and you can get them to spend quite a bit...get a whole outfit...**

**Siobhan (sales asst, 'Mojo'): (laughs)...I love flirting with guys...I swear that's why I love being on jeans so much...and they love it too...guaranteed I can get them to buy either 'G-Star', 'Full Circle', or 'Replay' [jeans that retail between £72-£112] just through telling them their ass looks really sexy...it makes all the difference and now I might be getting senior sales...**

**Jade (sales asst, 'Croft'): I'll maybe flirt with a few guys just to make sure I do target...if I'm up [on target] for the week then I'd be less likely...unless he's hot...**

This contradicts the conventional notion of female sexuality as passive. Here the women are actively using and manipulating men through sexuality to achieve their own goals and for their own pleasure. Female staff may at times act in a stereotypically feminine way, but the

motivations behind such behaviour can lead us to question whether female staff are necessarily passive in respect of the commodification of their sexualities. Aggressively chasing a sale and using feminine attributes, behaviour and sexuality can hardly be seen as passive. Female workers in pro-active retailers were even domineering and forceful with customers in an intricately staged performance designed to force a sale but in a way that could be disguised as 'good customer service'.

**Kate (sales asst, 'Mojo'): (laughs) I told this one bloke the other week "you're not fucking leaving this shop without buying a new shirt for tonight" (laughs)...the guy had been in ages so we had a bit of banter going...I was serious and he knew...**

**Gemma (sales asst, 'Mojo'): advantages?...well lads don't have *these* (points to breasts and laughs)...I just point them in the right direction til I catch a bite...men do like being served off pretty girls, especially if you flirt with them a bit, I'm sure they end up buying things they don't really want...**

The humour here masks the power that these women have ultimately exerted over their customers. Kate in particular is so skilled at selling and using her sexuality (through 'banter') that she can even swear and be very aggressive with the customer she mentions. Similarly Gemma

suggests that some of the men she flirts with end up buying clothes that 'they don't really want' as a result of selling her sexually commodified labour. However, this kind of service can become problematic:

**Jonelle (sales asst, 'Mojo'):...men love it when you're all over them...the only problem is if their girlfriend is there, then you're the 'other woman', you have to be careful then 'cos they get jealous and march them out the shop if they think you're trying to steal their man...**

Here, Jonelle pinpoints how selling sexuality as part of the product has limitations. When a female partner is present, the sales encounter needs to be carefully managed so that the worker does not pose a sexual threat. However, despite this exception, seduction was clearly an effective sales technique, but also *the* main technique used by female workers in their labour performances. However, heterosexual/normative sexual servicing was not exclusive to the female workers. At times their male colleagues would also use their heterosexuality to great effect.

#### *Men selling sex to women*

As noted above, men will also sell their sexuality to female customers. This has been documented elsewhere by Brannan's (2005) ethnographic study of the mobilisation of workers' sexuality in pursuit of organizational goals. Brannan highlights the processes by which the stereotypically heterosexual norm of predatory, rapacious male sexuality

is reinforced. In his study, customer service representatives in the call centre were encouraged to develop 'relationships' with their clients, and Brannan documents the gendered character and overtly sexualized nature of this relationship. Team leaders in the study regularly fostered competition between male workers in an attempt to form bonds between themselves and female customers: "An aggressive form of heterosexuality was 'implicitly compulsory' for customer service representatives in the case-study company". (Brannan: 2005: 396)

In my research, competition was not fostered on the basis of relationships with customers, but was encouraged in terms of gaining sales. In a similar way, managers in 'Mojo' and 'Croft' would often pit members of staff against each other to win small prizes (gift vouchers, chocolates, cash, time off, early finishes with full pay etc.). The emphasis placed upon gaining sales meant that male workers would also use flirting with women as a means to close a sale.

**Greg (sales asst, 'Mojo'): I love flirting with older women, at first they're kind of suspicious of you, but once they get that it's all a bit of fun they relax and you can have good crack with them...then they keep coming back to you because you're giving them a bit of sexual attention that they might not be getting at home or at work or stuff...**

**Gemma (sales asst, 'Mojo'): "teeny boppers" are like jelly around the likes of Arran or Connor...**

In this way male workers are clearly trading on their looks to launch a 'charm-offensive' on women to get them to buy clothing. They would also use other male colleagues to model clothes and close a sale. In this way men were able to capitalise to some extent on the masculine/heterosexual appeal of other men in order to maximise sales and enhance their status as a good seller. This was also used in a non-sexual way when women would be buying for their sons and needed to see one of the male workers try things on to size them up.

This supports the argument to some extent that male workers are not sexualised in the same way as female workers performing the same jobs. Men do not *have* to directly sell their desire in the way women do. Despite this however, a key feature of male worker's labour was the requirement to sell their masculine selves to customers. This in itself retains a lot of the features of 'sexual service' as it predominantly involves the selling of heterosexual masculinity.

### ***Homosocial servicing***

I have developed this category of 'sexual servicing' to elaborate upon the labour performances of male workers, but also to help analyse when female workers serve other women. Although the male sales assistants may not engage in the same kind of sexual servicing of (straight) male

customers as their female counterparts, they do, nevertheless, commodify their masculinity and exchange this in the labour process.

Male staff had to sell their 'maleness' to other men and ultimately also sell clothes. Male sales assistants did this through interacting in a traditionally hegemonic masculine way or by trading on their supposed 'innate' fashion sense 'inherited' through their perceived homosexuality. Even where openly homosexual workers were a part of the sales team, they remained relatively 'masculine' in their labour performances most of the time. Heterosexual male workers approached male customers head on, wink or nod their heads and regularly used the phrase 'mate'. This was used by men to break down the awkwardness that some men may feel shopping, to make them feel welcome and at ease, but also to break down the formal barriers between service provider and consumer:

**Gemma (sales asst 'Mojo'): listening to the lads serve, its all like, 'mate this...' and 'mate that...' and 'mate...', 'mate...', 'mate...'**

Through the constant repetition of 'mate' men are repeating and thus constituting their heterosexuality via aesthetic labour. Using the word mate is not just about language, it is also about performance – performing the role of a heterosexual male. In this way, and as we have seen already in the previous chapter, men hold an advantage over their female colleagues because they share a connection with other men in

the production of their masculine selves. This does not only apply to the male workers, but also to the male customers. In this case, the male shop assistants also co-operate in the stylized performances of their customers through the service they provide. They help to dress men and thus worker and consumer co-constitute each others stylised masculine selves. They are colleagues in the constitution of their masculine identities. Such arguments need not exclude gay men because the emphasis is on shared masculinities rather than sexualities. As long as gay workers were not 'overly camp' and could relate to (predominantly) heterosexual customers, they could also be involved in the production and consumption of heterosexualised masculine selves.

The only openly homosexual workers I encountered were employed at 'Croft'. It is notable that although these men exhibited very fashion-conscious, sometimes flamboyant and at times 'camp' masculinity, they often remained inconspicuous in terms of their sexuality (Ed in particular was especially skilled at 'blending' in sharing many of the dispositions associated with hegemonic masculinity). This seemed to confer credibility in terms of masculine fashionability, not only through their interest in fashion, but also as an immanent feature of their stylised masculinity and homosexuality:

**Kelli (Manager, 'Croft'): Ed and Leo are both gay...great sellers...they have a real feel for what is gonna be big**

**next...fantastic fashion sense...but then all gay men have great taste don't they?**

**Dominique (sales asst, 'Croft'): Ed and Leo are dead fashionable...Leo is a bit more camp I think than Ed, he wears more jewellery and Ed is a bit more of a bloke...but just like the colours, the kinds of jeans...they always look like they've got something new on every day...I've got other gay friends...I'm their fag hag...and they're all really trendy too...gay men are so cool...**

These comments typify how fashionability is seen as an immanent feature of homosexual identities<sup>1</sup>. As we have seen previously, this modern flamboyance and fashionability is rooted in cultural notions and concerns over the traditional figure of the 'dandy' (Moers, 1960; Wilson, 1985; Hollander, 1994; Mort, 1996; Nixon, 1996; Breward, 2006; Luckett, 2006).

Although the number of openly gay male workers in this study was small, both Ed and Leo at Croft displayed established patterns of interacting with other gay male customers. In this instance they could act in a number of ways but admitted to continuing with their regular labour performances geared towards good customer service.



**Leo (sales asst, 'Croft'): serving is serving...I'm a regular guy with most people**

**Ed (sales asst, 'Croft'): I'm not overly camp I don't think anyway...gay guys are still just the same as straight customers...**

These comments indicate that there is not necessarily anything different from the way both Ed and Leo serve male customers. This 'regular' mode of serving was similar in many respects to the way other male staff interacted with male customers. Both Ed and Leo shared experiences of the local drinking culture with male customers and made general small talk about music, weather, shopping and clothes etc. The only real fundamental difference that I observed was that they rarely if ever used the phrase 'mate' or any other alternative when serving other men and as they had little personal interest in sports, rarely used this in their conversations. This may be explained through the relative elasticity of these particular gay men's masculinity. Instead of being typically 'feminine', these gay men were, in the main, quite masculine in terms of their labour performances, interests and leisure pursuits.

As we have seen with regard to the gay workers at 'Croft', the perceived fashionability associated with homosexual men brings with it a level of credibility when giving customers opinions on clothing or when customers ask advice. However, the majority of the men I studied

identified as heterosexual. Although the gay workers at 'Croft' were seen as 'great sellers', other employees saw camp aesthetic labour performances as 'risky' for individual identities or detrimental to making sales. These men sold fashion to male customers on the basis of their shared heterosexual masculinity, thus avoiding being perceived as too camp as a result of paying *too much* attention to their looks:

**Gemma (sales asst, 'Mojo'): I think sometimes when the lads put too much effort into it (appearance) some guys will steer clear...they'll think they're a poof or something...**

**Sean (sales asst, 'Croft'): I cannot be too much of a tart...like wearing loads of jewellery and them leather cuff things...and I'd never use sunbeds or fake tan...blokes...wouldn't take me seriously.**

Here we can see Butler's notion of performativity in full operation as part of the work-based performance of aesthetic labour. Workers must achieve normative gender identities through repeated acts and stylizations of the body. The appearance and aesthetic labour of workers constitutes them as men/women and heterosexual/homosexual. For heterosexual men, paying too much attention to appearance runs the risk of them being constituted as homosexual. Guerrier and Adib (2004) in their study of gender identities in the work of overseas tour reps similarly found that:

*... expressing one's (hetero)sexuality at work has a different consequence for men and for women. For women, it reinforces their subservient position as commodified bodies (Adkins, 1995; Tyler and Abbot, 1998). For men, it reinforces their masculine identity... (2004: 347)*

Others have also pointed to the importance of maintaining a sense of heterosexuality as crucial to the preservation of masculine identity (Lorber and Farrell, 1991; Segal, 1999). Policing the boundaries of masculinities requires an exclusion of the feminine. As Segal notes: 'Men's dread of effeminacy [has been brought about by] men themselves in their collective attempt to affirm mastery over those they definitively exclude to preserve the category of manhood' (1999: 169). To reinforce this and ensure its continuance she suggests that men carry out a mutual, 'continual and ubiquitous policing of any "effeminate" deviance' (1999: 157)'. The comments of the workers above suggest that this is true to some extent. However the relations between masculinities are complex. Although divisions remain between heterosexual and homosexual men, shared dispositions and tastes still bring them together in front-line service situations.

### *Straight men serving gay men*

The way other male staff approached and interacted with overtly gay men was variable. In the majority of cases and where staff spoke of this,

interaction was the same as when they served (perceived) straight men. In this scenario, male workers treated these men in the same way as any other male customer.

**Greg (sales asst, 'Mojo'): I have this gay couple that come in quite a bit...well I think they're together cos...well...they're always together and you can tell...they're still blokes I don't see them differently cos they're gay...we like the same music and clothes...they're sound...**

**Neil (sales asst, 'Mojo'): gay lads, straight lads...we're all lads right...**

We can see here that instead of a straightforward form of sexual service, the male workers are exhibiting homosociality and using this to establish rapport and forge relations. The key issue for Greg and Neil is a shared masculinity - the gay customers are 'still blokes' or as Neil identifies 'we're all lads'. In this instance both Greg and Neil are not selling or co-constituting the heterosexual masculine identities of their customers as part of the product. Instead, these workers are offering a stylised homosociality as part of the product. Greg underlines this perfectly by the fact that he and his regular 'gay couple' share similar interests. These examples suggest that male workers and customers produce and consume a particular stylised homosociality as an inherent part of the product in this environment. However, this form of sexual

servicing is not exclusive to male workers and customers. Female employees also had scope to sell homosociality as a product of their labour.

*'Girl on girl' action*

Women would frequently look to buy something for a male partner or relative and also for themselves. These women were split into two categories by staff – the 'female shopper' and the 'lesbian'. The customers described here as lesbians were treated in an altogether different way to the 'female shopper'. Female workers spoke about enjoying serving 'female shoppers' on occasion:

**Jonelle (sales asst, 'Mojo'): sometimes you get like a nice one [female customer], or if there's a couple of girls the same age that you can have a laugh about boys with...**

This comment highlights Jonelle's ability to establish rapport with female customers on the basis of their (assumed) shared heterosexuality. In addition they would also play on the sexualities of their heterosexual female customers by using good-looking male staff (and even male customers on some occasions!) to model clothes.<sup>2</sup>

Similarities could be drawn here to the way male co-workers forge relations with male customers. However, this was much less prevalent among female workers and customers than was the case with men. In

contrast to the homosociality of their male colleagues, female workers felt they could not forge relationships as easily with female shoppers for two reasons. Firstly, female shoppers were seen as less receptive to pro-active selling than their male counterparts. Secondly, the majority of female staff spoke of a certain level of animosity between themselves and female customers. They often felt female customers spoke down to them, were 'bitchy' towards them or were jealous of their looks and appearance. Consequently, they focused their efforts on normative sexual servicing of men.

The 'homosocial' servicing of customers remains a 'sexual' service because it is rooted in shared masculinities and femininities. Male workers sell their stylised masculinities to particular men in the production and consumption of masculine selves. These 'selves' were predominantly heterosexual and involved male workers selling their heterosexual or stylised identities to other men. Female workers were also able to sell homosociality to customers, but they perceived this as more difficult. This could be a direct result of the sexualisation of the environment and workers. Given the nature of the product (male clothing) and the fact female workers are selling their sexualities to male customers, female customers are more likely to see them as competition rather than friends. This situation is unlikely to be the case for men, as they are more easily aligned with each other through their shared tastes and dispositions.

The final category of sexual servicing explores the scope for gay customers to consume the sexual service of workers. This illuminates how gay and straight workers sell their sexualities to male customers. This appears to be an exclusive resource for male workers as their female counterparts were unable to offer themselves in the same way to lesbian shoppers.

### ***Homosexual servicing***

This category of sexual servicing involves workers selling 'deviant' sexuality to customers. This was an interesting phenomenon because it was exclusively available to male workers. The data presented initially examines how Ed and Leo at 'Croft' sell their homosexuality to gay shoppers. However, it becomes apparent that gay workers can also sell their homosexuality to straight men as long as this is carefully managed. Furthermore, straight male workers were able to exhibit mobility in relation to their sexuality and incorporate this into their labour performances. Such mobility was not available for female workers as they were unable to relate to the figure of the 'butch lesbian' that typified their experiences of gay female shoppers. This will be dealt with at the end of this section, but first I wish to focus on the homosexual/deviant sexual servicing of the gay workers at 'Croft' – Ed and Leo.

**Leo (sales asst, 'Croft'):...you just get a vibe  
sometimes...like your gaydar goes off...if he's fit then I'll be  
all over him like a hussy...if he's a minger then I'll hold back**

**a bit but everyone likes feeling fancied so a bit of flirting goes a long way...I love flirting with straight men but you've got to be careful...only if you know you can get away with it...make it funny.**

**Ed (sales asst, 'Croft'): I'm not overly camp I don't think...if someone is clearly interested then I might flirt a bit to get them to spend...**

Clearly, both Ed and Leo sell their homosexuality to gay customers in order to boost their sales and productivity. When Leo's 'gaydar' goes off and he is attracted to a 'fit' customer he admits to being 'all over him like a hussy' and that even if the customer in question is a 'minger' he maintains that 'a bit of flirting goes a long way'. Similarly, Ed states that if a customer is 'clearly interested' he will exploit this to increase his sales figures. In Leo's case, he even enjoys flirting with straight men. However, this is not necessarily an easy activity, he emphasises the use of caution and only does it when he knows he can get away with it, masking the whole performance with humour. In this way gay men actively sell their sexuality as part of the product to other gay men, but as Leo demonstrates, this can also occur when he can 'get away with it' with straight men. In this sense Leo parodies his own sexuality in order to make his more 'camp' labour performances more palatable to his straight male customers. In this way, Leo is successful in 'othering' himself. Because his camp performance is extreme and humorous he



deliberately makes himself less threatening to heterosexual customers and therefore enables them to freely consume his homosexuality as part of his labour performance. This represents a 'playing' with sexualities that seems to be reserved for men and is also visible when straight male workers sell sexuality to gay male customers.

*Straight men sexually servicing gay men*

When serving gay customers male workers could flirt tenuously and even blatantly, but they would justify this by citing the importance of meeting and surpassing targets:

**Arran (sales asst, 'Mojo'): if you think a bloke is gay then you'll be careful, but you'll play up to it...**

**Phil (sales asst, 'Mojo'): if I can get loads of money out of him then I just go for it...the girls do it all the time with blokes so why not?...it doesn't mean I'm gonna sleep with them...it's all about making target**

We can see here the caution and rationale behind such behaviour. Both Arran and Phil 'play up to it' and 'go for it' in the pursuit of targets. In this way they are without a doubt engaging in risky behaviour in terms of their masculine identities, but can appeal to the fact 'its all about making target.' Therefore the biggest risk to heterosexual masculinity, in the form of selling themselves as sex objects to other men, poses a

challenge for these workers, but one that they can successfully negotiate by citing an unflinching determination to make targets.

This reinforces the notion of 'flexibility' and 'transtextuality' in terms of identity (Adkins, 2000; Diawara, 1998). Homosexual men are always defined in terms of their (homo)sexuality but heterosexual men can 'play up to it', can dabble with behaviours in order to perform their jobs effectively, or indeed to negotiate the feminised nature of retail and service sector work while maintaining a sense of their heterosexual masculinity. However, the same was not true for female workers when serving gay women. When female workers thought they were serving lesbians, they felt a similar animosity to when serving women in general, but this was more extreme. Female staff I interviewed characterised lesbians as aggressive, 'picky', 'difficult' and 'moody', and therefore non-receptive to their charms. Similarly they struggled to offer their sexuality or fashionability as part of the product to gay women:

**Gemma (sales asst, 'Mojo'):** obviously we get a few butch lesbians in...its always them because I suppose the pretty ones buy women's stuff...I just avoid them...or like get something if they ask me but that's it...they're too moody

**Jade (sales asst, 'Croft'):** sometimes with the lesbians I don't get it...I can't help them...I know what looks good on women and men, not women dressing like men...but I don't know

**what lesbians like...I don't think it looks nice anyway so I  
can't be false and be like you look lovely when she looks like  
a bloke...**

Not only do we see Gemma and Jade withdrawing certain elements of their performances in this instance, but also that these workers cannot adapt to the butch lesbian aesthetic in the same way that their male colleagues can adapt to serving gay men. This is probably due to the fact that the gay men in this setting are still trying on and buying men's clothing. Although a separation may be made on the basis of sexuality, these men can still share a stylised homosociality. If the situation were reversed, male workers could react in similar ways if they had to sell women's clothing to men. Returning to the comments made by Gemma and Jade, we can see clearly that they distance themselves from the figure of the butch lesbian. They do so through the process of 'othering' as these women do not fit with the categories of 'male' or 'female'. These workers remain civil and servile towards these customers, but are unable to offer them the same level of service as they would men, female shoppers or even 'pretty ones' (lesbians). This inability stems from their staunchly heterosexist stance regarding appropriate appearances for men and women.

It is also interesting to note from these comments, that female workers are aware of the commodification of their sexuality as part of the product and have actively withdrawn this from the service encounter. This

highlights how the intangible product being offered (sexuality or homosociality) is not static, but dynamic – it changes according to the situation and is able to be withdrawn completely.

This emphasises Adkins' (2000; 2002) point that mobility in relation to identity is not available to all. The women here could not be as mobile in relation to sexuality as their male co-workers because they are required to meet the aesthetic standards of fashionable and heterosexually appealing young women. This prevented female workers from being able to have 'lesbian hair' or wear 'lesbian skirts' (Adkins, 2000).

Consequently this requires them to adhere to conventional standards of feminine dress when performing aesthetic labour. However, some male workers felt that similar conventions also exerted pressure on them to maintain an appropriately heterosexual appearance or relation to appearance. The comments earlier indicate that male workers felt they needed to exercise caution in terms of their appearance so as not to appear camp or too image-conscious. These concerns were based in fear of being misrecognised as 'homosexual'. I will return to this point towards the end of the chapter but now I want to analyse the implications of the typology I have developed and the potential for worker agency in respect of their labour.

### **Power and mobility through sexual servicing**

Although the aggressive nature of some female workers sexual service, as well as the ability to withdraw it completely may look empowering and

active, the majority of the time they *have* to engage in this kind of behaviour with male customers to facilitate sales and secure their position. Any female worker who failed to perform feminine heterosexuality in this way would risk being seen as shy or not fitting in and consequently place themselves under further surveillance and scrutiny. So even though we can see an active element in the way female workers use their sexuality to achieve sales, it is still a compulsory performance in line with the aesthetic of the shop and also the heterosexual imperative. In contrast, male workers were much more flexible in relation to their sexual servicing and aesthetic labour. Some men were able to play with the boundaries between homosexuality and heterosexuality and offer their masculinity and sexuality as part of the product. Stylised homosociality remains a 'sexual service' because it involves the selling of masculinity to other men. This masculinity, although 'dandified', remains rooted in certain hegemonic values of fraternity and hedonism. At first this looks as though sexuality transcends the aesthetic labour of employees as both gay and straight workers and customers form relations on the basis of shared dispositions and tastes. However, the comments of the workers indicate that the masculine performances of workers need to retain a heterosexual character. We can see this from the concerns of workers over appearing to be 'homosexual', Ed's 'blending' as a 'typical bloke', and Leo's extreme flamboyance when he 'can get away with it...make it funny'. In this way, the stylised performances of masculinity are also compulsory performances. Male workers *have* to be able to relate to

other men in order to make sales. Management measure this through monitoring individual sales figures and observation of worker-customer interaction. In comparison to their female colleagues, men must also sell their sexuality through their performance of masculinity, but they are also able to do this directly. Therefore, it appears that some male workers are in fact more 'mobile' in relation to their sexualities than their female colleagues. This 'mobility' becomes an 'added extra' to the compulsory performance of their masculine selves. It is through these compulsory performances that workers are also able to establish and maintain relations with customers and boost their productivity. These relationships are also indicative of the sexualised aesthetic labour of employees and it is to this area that I now turn.

### **Relationships with customers**

Adkins found in her study of female leisure workers that: 'sexual servicing of men is not restricted to the 'sex industry', but rather is a common feature of women's waged work' (1995: 158). I have demonstrated that this sexual servicing is not only restricted to female workers. However, men and women were sexualised in contrasting ways – although men could sell themselves as the objects of desire, more often than not, their sexual servicing involved the performance of male bonding. What was important for both men and women however, was the ability to form relationships (either through flirting or bonding) with customers and so build up a body of 'regulars'. In general, retailers are increasingly trying to mobilise relations between staff and

customers. Regardless of the 'authenticity' of these relationships, if the customer gets some level of pleasure from them, then workers (and retailers) can benefit from maintaining these intimate connections. In their study of customer-salesperson relationships, Reynolds and Beatty (1999) found that 'relationship marketing' was popular amongst retailers because of the assumption that building relationships was economically valuable. This assumption was also evident from the comments of workers:

**Siobhan (sales asst, 'Mojo'):** I've only been here a few months and I'm already recognising the faces and getting my own regulars...

**Craig (sales asst, 'Croft'):** I have quite a few regulars that I'll see once a month or maybe a couple times...they're important cos you have a steady, reliable source of sales...it means you're an established member of the team...and people like you...like having a particular barber or mechanic...

**Gemma (sales asst, 'Mojo'):** after a while everyone gets their own regulars...having your own punters is good, makes you look like a good seller...you're bringing in the bacon which makes you more valuable...its like I have one or two hairdressers I'll book my hair with and no-one else

A few things are worth picking up on here. Firstly is the fact that 'everyone' appears to build up a body of regular customers, the causal factor appears to be time. Secondly, workers attach great value to having a set of regulars. Both Craig and Gemma point out how it gives them a 'steady reliable source of sales', they 'make you look like a good seller' and increases their resources in the workplace making them an 'established member of the team' and 'more valuable'. Thirdly, the staff see the similarities between the relations they build with customers and those formed between other workers from alternative industries such as barbers, hairdressers etc. What strikes me about this is the imagery created when the staff spoke about the relations they formed with customers. Given the kind of aesthetic labour that the staff perform and the use of phrases such as 'regulars' and 'punters', links can be drawn between this kind of labour and that performed by sex workers. This is further heightened when we look at how possessive staff are about their regulars. Immediately they talk about them as belonging to them saying 'my own', 'I have' and we can see what happens when someone tries to 'steal' another worker's regulars:

**Arran (sales asst, 'Mojo'): some of the girls are terrible for trying to nick them [regulars]...I usually go over when the guy's in the fitting room and say 'look they're one of mine back off'...or I'll just go right up to them when they're in the middle of serving them and be like 'hiya mate long time no**



**see, what you after'...the girls will be mad at first but then understand when they know...**

**Jonelle (sales asst, 'Mojo'): you *do* get possessive over them...like especially if one of the other girls starts chatting to them you get jealous and mad...its not anyone's fault you just don't always know who sees who...if like I know he's one of Gemma's or something I'll stay clear or try and get Gemma...at worst I'll serve them but know I can't really have him**

**Kelly (sales asst, Croft): some people do steal your regulars, like if you can't get to them in time, like if you're serving someone else, you've just got to be persistent and steal the bastards back...some people get dead bitchy or arsey about it...I'll not fight over it...alls fair in love and war...**

Here we can see that staff can feel indignation, jealousy, rage and frustration when other staff 'move in' on their territory. There also seems to be a certain code among staff that stealing regulars is wrong. Arran explains that the girls will 'understand when they know'. In the same shop, Jonelle goes on to point out that she does not blame other staff and outlines the difficulties in keeping track of which customers 'belong' to certain staff. Jonelle will even go as far as to 'stay clear' (thus challenging the service ethic) or go and get the member of staff who

usually serves a particular customer. In this sense we can see some level of solidarity among staff and potential for work-based relations and mutual respect opening up the possibility to challenge the sales-driven work ethic of the organisation. This point is elaborated more fully in the final chapter but at this point it is important to explore the extent to which the sexualisation of workers opens up the possibility for sexual harassment by customers.

### **Sexual harassment**

The sexual harassment of workers in sexualised environments has been previously documented (Hochschild, 1983; Adkins, 1995; Hughes and Tadic, 1998; Folgero and Fjelstad, 1995; Guerrier and Adib, 2000).

Sexual harassment is a product and indicator of wider power relations. In this instance, it is also illustrative of what is assumed to be offered or available for customers to 'consume' as part of the asymmetric power relations between worker and customer. A number of incidents involving the sexual harassment of staff occurred during the fieldwork period, but four are appropriate to mention here. Notably all of these incidents occurred in 'Mojo' where staff were actively encouraged to use sexuality as a selling technique through flirting with customers and through humouring groups of men or participating in heterosexual banter with them. Two of these incidents involve female members of staff and the other two involve male members of staff.

One day I was observing a member of staff called 'Jen', she was an A-Level student working part-time to help fund her way through college. After college she wanted to go onto become a dancer. She was very tall, slim and attractive. We were working on the jeans when a small group of young men aged about sixteen came onto the section. I could see them giggling and looking at Jen and whispering things to each other Jen didn't notice this as she was busy refolding jeans, turning back and forth from one unit to the jean piles. I kept watching as one of the youths waited for Jen to turn her back again. Seizing his opportunity he sharply moved forward and put his hand near her bum. Jen turned around straight away with a slight blush on her face and looked directly at the customer indicating she had felt something. The young man casually sauntered away and then after a quick re-group with his friends (accompanied by more giggling and whispering) he returned to Jen, and said innocently 'excuse me but you've dropped your pencil). He had taken Jen's pencil out of the back pocket of her (very tight-fitting 'Miss Sixty') jeans. I waited for her reaction, she maintained the rosy glow that the encounter had brought out across her face, smiled and politely said 'thankyou'! Afterwards, having waited for the group to leave I asked Jen about the incident. I was shocked at her reply. Jen said she was 'embarrassed and angry' because she felt the hand go into her pocket with her jeans being so tight. At first she thought he had just felt her bum, but then after she realised he had taken her pencil she said 'I wouldn't have been as bothered if he'd just copped a feel but he actually took *my* pencil'. Jen felt obvious embarrassment from the situation, but

the real indignation came from the fact this person had taken something which belonged to her, a possession, her pencil, rather than the fact she had just been the victim of sexual harassment.

Another incident and one which really shook me at the start of the fieldwork involved someone I had actually worked with for a year and knew quite well. 'Niah' at the time was a nineteen year-old training to become a beauty therapist. She was working part-time to help fund her course. I was observing alongside Niah while she was covering the fitting rooms one day. Two male customers came into the fitting rooms, one with items to try, the other simply to accompany his friend. While Niah disappeared to the stockroom to get a different size for the customer I volunteered to cover the fitting rooms for her. I glanced over and the friend had his head in the fitting room door and I could hear whispers and restrained laughter. When Niah came back I stood back where I was originally, still in view of the fitting room entrance and within earshot. Upon leaving the customer gave all of the garments he'd tried on back to Niah to put away, as she was hanging them up his friend made a grabbing gesture behind Niah's rear. The other guy saw this and obviously thinking it was funny (a smile crept on his face) began to engage Niah in conversation about the clothes he had tried on, all the while his friend was making explicit gestures behind Niah's back. They then proceeded to swap roles as the other guy began to vaguely ask about some t-shirt he thought he had seen in the shop a couple of months back, stuttering, fumbling and lingering over monosyllabic words

in order to draw out the conversation. This was promptly accompanied by his friend then making the rude and explicit gestures behind Niah's back. Afterwards Niah told me she knew what they were doing, she could see them in the mirrors. She added, if that happened on a night out she would have, in her words, 'cracked them or told them where to go' but then she qualified her acceptance of the behaviour as 'all part of the job'.

Another time I was observing and in the vicinity of Phil (from 'Mojo'). While he was busy refolding jeans I heard a girl shout 'nice arse' and followed by 'get your cock out'. She was not alone, but accompanied by another girl about the same age. They looked about fifteen years old. I looked directly at Phil and saw that he had turned a bright red colour. He just looked at them and smiled as they walked around the shop and then left. I asked him how he felt about this immediately afterwards. Phil appeared a little flustered but was trying to take it in his stride. At the time he told me he was 'not bothered'. I later managed to ask Phil in an interview again how this had made him feel. Again he began to blush and then said:

**Phil (sales asst, 'Mojo'): it's like sexual harassment, I mean here I am just doing a job and in they come and start shouting that...when a teenage girl shouts stuff like that at you, it just makes you feel embarrassed and, well...just shit**

Another incident involving a male member of staff was quite astounding. 'Mark' had found himself in retail as a stop-gap. He initially had been in an unsuccessful boyband from the age of sixteen. After the band split up he found himself working full-time in retail before switching to part-time while he did A-Levels. Although the band had been unsuccessful, he had played many large venues and as a group supported other successful pop acts. Now Mark had a following of teenage 'groupies' who would hang around outside of his house and post letters through his front door etc. However, it wasn't long before they discovered where he worked. A small group of about 5-8 girls around the age of thirteen/fourteen began to frequent the shop and stand outside shouting for Mark while he was working. They would shout immature taunts at him if they caught a flash of his boxer shorts peeping out of the top of his low-slung jeans. In addition they would routinely hang around the sections Mark was working on and sexually harass him by making comments about the clothes he was wearing, but also about his body, and various parts of his body. This would get to Mark, he told me that he thought he 'asked for it' because of the fact he had been in a boyband, but he now found it embarrassing and affecting his behaviour. Accordingly, he would time his exits from the shop so as to avoid them, often staying an extra half an hour in the staff room after a shift. If he saw them enter the shop he would quickly find an excuse to leave the shopfloor, he would ask to go to the toilet, or 'invent' a customer and ask to run up to the stockroom for them.

All of these incidents reflect the sexual harassment within the setting. The fact the setting is public means that individuals can routinely harass members of staff. Perhaps because the space is a public, customers may feel the staff are merely animated components of this space (linked from aesthetic labour). The idea of the 'cult of the customer' (DuGay and Salaman, 1992) means that many people can try and take advantage because they know that as customers, their needs and wants rank above those of the workers. Some customers do not respect the bodily boundaries and feelings of staff as indicated by these incidents. What is interesting however, is that the staff saw this harassment as 'part of the job' and accepted it in some way. The women workers were more used to it than the men and appeared less embarrassed at what happened. In addition, the male members of staff were less 'prepared' or skilled at dealing with these situations. This could be indicative of the way women are sexualized in wider society and become skilled at dealing with obnoxious or abusive behaviour as part of their experiences as women (Adkins, 1995; Folgero & Fjeldstad, 1995; Hughes & Tadic, 1998; Guerrier & Adib, 2000; Williams, 2003). However, these situations disempowered the men and they struggled to negotiate these challenges as successfully as some of the other possible challenges to their masculinity mentioned in this and the previous chapter.

The challenges these men face as a result of their position in a female-concentrated occupation are representative of challenges to masculinity. Some writers would argue that this is further compounded by the

demands placed upon them as a result of their aesthetic labour and consequently lead to transgressive gender identities or transgressive practices (McDowell, 1997). However, debate has focused on whether these issues do in fact lead to hybrid gender identities and transgression and is this area that I will now consider.

### **Transgression**

Although writers such as McDowell (1997) have pointed to the transgressive potential of service work, I, like many other researchers, remain sceptical. Others have pointed out that the feminization of the labour market may in fact heighten gender differences (Wellington and Bryson, 2001; Cross and Bagilhole, 2002; Connell, 1995; Adkins, 2000; 2002). In their study of men in 'non-traditional occupations', Cross and Bagilhole (2002) found that men actively maintained traditional values associated with masculinity. Such work suggests that instead of transgression we need to understand the versatility of masculinities and their ability to adapt to social change (Chapman, 1988; Segal, 1990; Connell, 1995).

Adkins (2000) is similarly critical of McDowell's (1997) notion of transgressive gender performances. Instead Adkins says:

*...performances reveal the idea of coherent subjects in regard to the commodification aesthetic at work to be a cultural fiction. And in this sense it would seem that the commodification aesthetic*



*might well be linked to a queering of sexuality in service workplaces. But there are also professional service workers who, in terms of the commodification aesthetic, are disempowered 'Others'...such 'Others' are unable to be mobile in regard to performances of sexuality and gender, since processes of 'Othering' define workers in terms of particular and fixed genders and sexualities' (2000: 208)*

I think Adkins is right here to point out the misguided application of the notion of 'queer service workplaces'. She underlines the restrictions placed on women in terms of adhering to heterosexual norms of feminine dress and appearance (Adkins, 2000). In line with my research, the women in this study were subject to similar codes of regulation. They had to be conventionally attractive and pay attention to their appearance in order to provide the aesthetic labour demanded of them by the organisation. Such conventions over feminine 'beauty' or attractiveness rule out 'looking like a lesbian', and this is highly visible through female workers' reactions towards butch lesbians. As we have seen, the structure of heterosexual feminine aesthetics renders butch lesbian aesthetics unintelligible to Gemma and Jade, they were unable to 'get' why these women chose to dress and look that particular way. It is worth noting here that there is not direct equivalent for men. The only possible comparison would be the figure of the 'feminised fag'. Yet even he manages to achieve a level of acceptance as a 'dandified figure' and arbiter of taste. Male workers expressed concern over appearing too

image-conscious and thus fear of being misrecognised as homosexual. However, gay male aesthetics can be more readily subsumed into consumer culture as Bordo (1999) notes in relation to the advertising and mass marketing of male fashion and beauty products. This means that although male workers may be cautious in their own performances of masculinity, gay customers are less problematic for them than butch lesbians are for the female workers. This is because their stylised masculinities correspond with the store aesthetic. In contrast, we have seen quite clearly that any incorporation of 'the lesbian' in this environment is stifled by the inability of female workers to serve 'butch lesbians'. Rather they provide a service but do not offer the same product to these women as they do 'female shoppers' or male customers.

In the case of the male workers in my study, there was little scope for transgression at 'Legend' but some element of flexibility in relation to sexuality was possible at 'Croft' and 'Mojo'. This was due to the emphasis these retailers placed upon gaining sales and being fashionable. However, in line with previous research, the straight men in this study found and created ways to reinforce their heterosexual masculine identities. Through interacting with men in particular ways (i.e. referring to customers as 'mate') and by justifying potentially transgressive practices (flirting with gay men) as a means to an end, these male workers did not pose any challenge to existing gender identities. Similarly, the 'blending' and parodic performances of gay

workers suggests that any form of transgression or hybridity is limited as these men either 'concealed' their sexuality through adhering to masculine aesthetics, or successfully 'othered' themselves as overtly homosexual. This was compounded by the fact they were also seen as inherently fashionable as a result of their sexuality. Similarities can be drawn here between Diawara's (1998) analysis of transtextuality and immanence in the film *Pulp Fiction*. Diawara suggests that certain aspects of 'black masculinity' have become transtextual, that is, have become mobile and adoptable by different people. For Diawara, Travolta appears to embody black 'esthetique du cool' because he is able to 'take on' many of the aspects of 'black masculinity'. However, in comparison, Diawara notes that Samuel L. Jackson is denied such mobility as he 'just appears to be a black guy' (1998: 51). In this way, Travolta's character is able to take on the 'cool' characteristics of black masculinity while Jackson's 'cool' remains fixed or 'immanent' and therefore not extraordinary. This 'immanence' is similar to the way colleagues fixed the gay workers as inherently fashionable. This suggests that male workers may be able to trade on their fashionability as a resource until (or unless) they become fixed as homosexual, in which case it becomes an immanent and expected feature of their identity.

Consequently we can say that the notion of hybrid gender identities is unsupportable given the data presented here. Although transgressive gender practices may be in operation, such as men flirting with other

men and women workers being sexually aggressive through the instrumental pursuit of sales, scope for challenge is limited. This is due to the fact that traditional conceptualizations of gender and sexual identity remain part of the compulsory performances of workers and structure their aesthetic labour. These limitations have been outlined already as prescribed by the organisation aesthetic, but they are also rooted in the fear of stigma faced by employees.

### **Wearing the right label – avoiding stigmatisation**

Fear of stigma was a real concern for the workers in this study and these stigmas revolved around sexuality. There were four main areas of concern – being seen as homosexual; becoming labelled a bitch; being called a pervert and being seen as promiscuous. Although each was interesting in its own regard I will focus on the two most prominent fears: of being seen as homosexual; and of being seen as promiscuous.

These fears were gender specific, with men unsurprisingly being afraid of being labelled as homosexual and women anxious about their sexual reputations and respectability.

### ***Fear of being labelled homosexual***

As we have seen a shift in traditional 'male' occupations, research has proliferated into occupations posing a threat to men and masculinities. This research has suggested that men in feminised occupations are 'stigmatized', by being seen as 'effeminate' and 'disadvantaged'

compared to other men, and accordingly may even conceal their employment in an attempt to avoid such negative consequences (Heickes, 1991; Morgan, 1992; Allan, 1993; Williams, 1993; Carmichael, 1995; Folgero and Fjelstad, 1995; Benton DeCorse and Vogtle, 1997; Cross and Bagilhole, 2002; Guerrier and Adib, 2004; Lupton, 2006).

This was an issue for the male workers I studied, but something that they felt they could negotiate effectively. Challenges they faced came mainly from friends and family who would often find their occupations as a source of amusement or a reason to make fun of the male workers for being employed in a fashion retailer. The work that the men did was also not taken seriously by friends and family, as some of the men spoke about how people would often trivialise their work as 'standing around all day' or 'just folding tops'. Both male and female workers took offence at this, but also did not take it too seriously as they were rarely planning to stay in retail as part of a long-term career path. For the men, they could brush this off as lack of understanding of the actual work involved in selling and maintaining the shop as a fashionable space (i.e. the time it took to fold an entire section and creating window displays). They were not afraid to accept that they took pride in their appearance and in fact thought that this gave them a level of capital, either at work, but also in their social lives – especially when it came to intimate relationships with women.

I have even illustrated that male workers could play with the boundaries of hetero/homosexuality. However, I must emphasise here that this kind of behaviour is not entirely transgressive or without consequence. As we have seen from the comments earlier, these men must avoid unsettling their heterosexual performances. Workers believed that wearing fake tan or using the sunbeds can result in certain male customers keeping clear or indeed not taking them seriously. In the case of Leo at Croft, where he does openly exhibit his homosexuality, and flirt with straight men, he does so in a non-threatening way using humour. In this instance he is unafraid of being labelled homosexual because he already positioned as a homosexual.

In terms of safeguarding their sexuality, the female workers faced an altogether different problem, being seen as too sexual or rampant, promiscuous nymphomaniacs.

### ***Fear of being seen as promiscuous***

For women, the primary concern they had was in safeguarding their reputations. They had to sell themselves as the objects of heterosexual desire, and also used their feminine charms to get male customers to spend money and keep coming back. However, they felt that this could lead to male customers assuming that they were sexually available, but also led to other women holding a dim view of them as man-stealing 'slags'.

**Siobhan (sales asst, 'Mojo'): blokes think you're always up for it...like on tap...girls probably see me and think 'she's a real slag'...I don't want people to think about me that way...its just my job**

**Kelly (sales asst, 'Croft'): some girls come in with their boyfriends and like, grab hold of them and steer them about when they see you...then if you show them clothes they'll never like them...they want to be in and out cos they think you're after their bloke...**

**Jonelle (sales asst, 'Mojo'): I have slept with a few guys that I've served at some point...It's a good way to meet people...it's just other women are so bitchy about it, they're the worst ones...so much for sisterhood...**

Here we can see quite plainly that the female workers feel under intense scrutiny. This resonates with the difficulties experienced by some women in constructing 'respectable' femininity (Skeggs, 1997). Skeggs suggests that heterosexuality and femininity are classed leading to a situation where:

*For working-class women invested in respectability it is very hard for them to take on a sexed identity (either lesbian or hetero)*

*because it is precisely being sexed which they have been trying to avoid in their claims for respectability (1997: 135-6)*

This is perhaps the root of the tension these women face in terms of their own behaviour and the often negative way they feel other women react to them. Nevertheless, this did not stop the likes of Jonelle sleeping with their male customers. Serving in a shop was a 'good way to meet people'. This highlights how work and leisure filter into each other and it is to this that I will now turn.

### **Sexualities outside of the workplace**

As we have seen, sexuality is a major aspect of the aesthetic labour of the workers that formed the basis of this research. The way they perform according to the organisation aesthetic and in line with organisational goals also serves to create and sustain their gendered identities. Given the sexualised nature of the work and the way staff build up a body of regulars, it is unsurprising that staff experience a continuation of their sexualised work roles outside of the workplace. This will be considered in greater detail in the penultimate chapter, but some key issues are important to discuss here.

First that the sexual servicing that staff perform in the workplace becomes an inevitable part of their lives outside of work. This is understandable if we consider that work-based performances form part of the overall performative nature of gender identity. Working in a public



environment, in a sexualised way and forming relationships with customers results in encounters with customers outside of work. Staff will inevitably be recognised and as a relationship has been fostered around the exchange of goods and services, customers may feel this relationship can be continued outside of the service encounter. Notably, this was only experienced by the workers of 'Croft' and 'Mojo', as they actively encouraged staff to form relationships with customers and to sell themselves in the pursuit of maximising sales.

Second, for the male workers at both 'Mojo' and 'Croft', the co-constitution of their heterosexual identities and stylised masculinities performed in the workplace was continued while the female workers found themselves the focus of men's sexual desire. This did happen with the male workers, but rarely in respect of attracting female customers. Instead, two of the men I spoke to found themselves the focus of sexual attention from gay men as some of the local trendy bars were situated with the local gay scene. Chance encounters with gay customers had resulted in the men having to awkwardly or directly avoid the attentions of the gay men they encountered.

Thirdly, that male customers would routinely seek to develop their relationships with the female sales assistants. This meant that the women I studied found they received a lot of attention from men when they were out drinking and socialising. Some of this was welcomed as it was a convenient way for them to find sexual partners, but sometimes

this was experienced as a problem. We have already seen that workers could find themselves in embarrassing, awkward and difficult situations when customers were sexually forward. As we will see in the penultimate chapter, staff had to deal with these problems in a delicate way so as not to jeopardise their relations with customers or suffer repercussions back at work. This is not to paint a gloomy picture of the lives of workers as forever dominated by their work roles. Indeed, a great many benefits were enjoyed by the connections and relationships formed as a result of where they worked.

### **Concluding remarks**

This chapter has focused on interrogating the product being sold in fashion retailers. Not only are the tangible products sold to customers, but also the worker's sexualities and stylised identities. Adkins' work has been used to develop a typology of 'sexual service' that can be applied to both male and female workers. This was important to account for the way workers sold their identities as part of their aesthetic labour.

Although both concepts of aesthetic labour and 'sexual service' are useful, they fail respectively to locate aesthetics within a wider sexual economy governing what is 'attractive' and also to fully account for the sexualisation of male workers. Looking at different forms of sexual service therefore enables further elaboration of the 'product' being sold as part of the aesthetic labour of employees. This also helps to explain why female workers seem 'locked' into exchanging their sexuality for male customers but cannot do so with stylised 'butch lesbians'. It also

helps to account for the fact certain gay men are 'acceptable others' within the setting as long as they continue to fall within the realms of 'attractive' and fashionable men.

I would agree with Adkins, that when working in the same occupation 'men and women are different sorts of workers' (1995: 153). However, it is inaccurate to claim that only women must sell their sexual selves as part of their job and that only women's sexual selves are subject to appropriation. Instead I have illustrated that men also sell their sexual selves to other men, but also to women.

In this way men were required to appeal to the heterosexual and homosexual male consumer, to have a 'flexible' or 'mobile' relation to sexuality (Adkins, 2002) in a way that their female colleagues were not. However, despite being 'mobile' or 'flexible', these performances are also compulsory. Men *must* be able to relate to male customers. This requirement predominantly involves being able to carry out homosocial servicing, through shared stylised masculinities, but also involved homosexual servicing. Although homosexualities can be incorporated into homosocial servicing, being able to embody and perform heterosexual masculinity is an implicit requirement. The majority of the workers in this study identified as heterosexual and of the openly gay workers, Ed successfully 'blended' through his appearance as a 'typical bloke' and Leo was only camp or flamboyant when he could get away with it. Failure to embody and perform masculinity appropriately led to

workers being seen as 'not fitting in' and ultimately not having their contracts renewed. Therefore, the male workers, in general, shared a common heterosexual stylised masculinity with their customers and were involved in the co-constitution of their own and their customer's heterosexual masculine selves.

When we look at the labour of male employees in this way we can see how their sexual selves are commodified and appropriated. Although this is similar to the compulsory (hetero)sexualisation of their female colleagues, the fundamental difference appears to be the extent to which workers engage in different forms of sexual service. Working on a menswear department, female workers appear to be trapped in terms of selling their sexualities and sexual availability. Their homosocial forms of sexual service are rooted in their (assumed) shared heterosexuality with female customers and their usual focus was on sexually servicing male customers. This highlights their *immobility* in terms of their sexualities at work. Heterosexual/normative servicing is a fundamental aspect of female sales assistants work.

However, although this is unrecognised in terms of work rewards (only meeting sales targets was rewarded), female workers are not oblivious to the fact they offer their sexual selves as part of the product. In fact, they actively use their sexuality as a resource to make sales, and this *is* recognised by management (as evidenced through their recruitment and retention of attractive women) even if it does go unrewarded. Similarly

we have seen that in some cases (serving butch lesbians) female workers are not required to sell themselves as this contradicts their heterosexual aesthetic labour performance. However, 'butch lesbians' represent a fairly modest segment of the customers of these shops. In contrast, gay men, were a much larger target group and male workers needed to be able to relate to these men and retain them as customers. They did so through homosocial, but also homosexual sexual servicing. In the case of heterosexual workers, this could be seen as an immense challenge to their masculinity. However, we have seen that the male workers here successfully negotiate and rationalise this behaviour through citing their determination to meet targets. In this way they are able to adhere to traditional hegemonic values. However, they do find certain aspects of this work challenging, in particular, when they are the victims of sexual harassment.

Sexual harassment exists for both male and female employees. This is a direct consequence of wider power structures, but also because of the power relations between worker and customer in a sexualised environment. Men may struggle to negotiate sexual harassment as successfully as their female colleagues and certainly cannot negotiate it as well as they can other challenges to their heterosexual masculinities outlined in the previous chapter. In line with previous research, female workers endure sexual harassment as 'part of the job'. This stands in stark contrast to the active and, at times, aggressive use of their sexualities in serving customers. This highlights the precarious position

that female workers, in particular, occupy in relation to the exploitation of their sexualities. Sexual harassment however, was not the major challenge for these workers. Instead they found that safeguarding their reputations was more important.

Both male and female workers were concerned with how others perceived them in terms of their sexualities. For heterosexual male workers this was rooted in fears of being labelled 'homosexual' but for female workers was based in terms of avoiding the label of 'slag'. The heterosexual male workers in this study felt that they have to carefully monitor their aesthetic labour so as not to appear 'too camp' and risk being labelled as homosexual. This risk was due, in part because of their particular stylised masculinities, but also because of their position in the feminised environment of fashion retail. In comparison, female workers held concerns over being labelled promiscuous or 'man-stealers'. This stems from the policing of feminine codes of respectability and seems to operate in terms of how women perceive each other rather than how men see them. Such policing was also seen to impact upon the ability of women to establish rapport with each other in the service encounter. All of the above issues relate more to the proactive sales environments of 'Mojo' and 'Croft'. These retailers also actively encourage workers to form relationships with customers that ultimately leads to the mobilisation of worker's sexualities outside of the workplace.

The combination of active selling in a sexualised environment leads to work and leisure filtering into each other. This can be experienced as both negative and positive by front-line service workers as the sexual servicing of customers moves beyond the workplace and into the realms of personal relationships outside of work. Such relations provide the focus for discussion in the penultimate chapter but for now attention will move towards the notion of 'customer service', management surveillance and worker resistance within the retail setting.

#### **Notes:**

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<sup>1</sup> However, this restricts gay men from being anything other than the typical 'fashionable fag.' Dominique's typification of gay men as fashionable consumers is so extreme that she sees herself not just as a friend, but as an accessory – 'their fag hag'.

<sup>2</sup> Notably, none of the female workers in the study identified as being a lesbian.

## **Chapter 5: 'Service', Surveillance and Resistance**

### **Introduction**

There has been a significant upsurge of research into service work in the past decade or so. Authors have examined the gendered nature of service work (Hochschild, 1983; Hall, 1993; McDowell, 1997; Tyler and Taylor, 1998), surveillance, control and resistance within the service setting (Rafaeli and Sutton, 1990; Taylor, 1998; 2002; Mulholland, 2004), and analysed a multitude of service occupations – nurses (James, 1989), flight attendants (Williams, 2003), call centre workers (Korczynski, 2001; 2003), beauty therapists (Sharma and Black, 2001), sex workers (Sanders, 2005), bank clerks (Forseth, 2005), retail workers (Du Gay, 1996; Pettinger, 2004), image consultants (Wellington and Bryson, 2001), waiters and waitresses (Crang, 1994), and tour reps and other hospitality jobs (Guerrier and Adib, 2000; 2004). Much of this work focuses on 'emotional labour' as a key element of service work. Yet service work is not homogeneous. There is great variation in service sector labour and in how organizations interpret, develop and deliver 'customer service'. (Abiala, 2000; Korczynski, 2001; Callaghan and Thompson, 2002; Glucksmann, 2004). This chapter examines the meanings attached to 'customer service'. This is carried out by looking at how management in this context interpret organisational logic and also through consideration of empirical and theoretical work in this area.

Discussion is also focused upon how workers perceive and experience the customers they encounter on a day-to-day basis. Analysis begins by exploring



the different characterisations of customers through staff discourse. These included customers as: powerful; pleasurable; and 'problems'. From the data a typology of 'problem customers' was developed to clarify how customers can be problematic for retail workers in various ways. This typology was created using employee definitions and discursive constructions of customers as well as my own experiences and observations during fieldwork. The categories constructed were: 'difficult returns'; 'time-wasters'; 'riflers'; 'last-minute dawdlers'; 'obnoxious twats'. Having considered this, I then move on to look at the level of control and surveillance within the setting.

Empirical work has already documented the level of control and surveillance within service sector workplaces (Mulholland, 2004; Korczynski, 2003; Taylor, 1998; 2002). Here I focus upon four main areas where management monitored and attempted to control employee behaviour and practice. The first area concerns how far management monitor task performance and service provision. Discussion then explores the extent to which the appearance of workers is strictly monitored and uniform requirements enforced. Initially this is controlled through the selection criteria management must follow. During the process of recruitment 'inappropriate' people are excluded. In addition, the examples of piercing, tattoos and clothing are used to illustrate how far managers control the aesthetic labour of their employees. This highlights the need for workers to continually produce and reproduce the 'aesthetic' element of their aesthetic labour. Another element of employees' labour that was strictly monitored was 'attitude'. In some ways this was also tied in with the monitoring of appearance as workers who failed to produce the 'right' appearance were seeing as not

having the right attitude. What counts as displaying the 'right attitude' and the implications of this for workers is discussed before also looking at the way staff sales are closely monitored. Attention focuses upon the consequences and severity of consistent underperformance but also the positive outcomes that staff enjoy as a result of performing well and the 'favours' management grant 'good workers'.

Despite the high level of surveillance and monitoring there was also scope for employee resistance and 'de-subordination'. The resistance strategies of workers were reactions against the doctrine of 'customer service', management focus on targets and organisation aesthetics. The variety of resistance strategies, acts of 'de-subordination' (Miliband, 1978) and 'tacit alliances' (Mulholland, 2004) workers engaged in are explored. These resistance/de-subordination strategies can be a valuable way for workers to negotiate their subordinate status in this environment but also enable them on occasion to successfully 'get the jump' (Whyte, 1948) on customers and management. Through the practices of 'faking' and sharing sales and adhering to an informal code of ethics, employees in retailers that encourage active selling are able to maintain some sense of control over their labour but also protect their position and status as a 'good worker'. These 'strategies' however cannot be too overt and must be 'disguised' or 'hidden'. Failure to do so leads to management sanction and possibly dismissal.

This chapter explores the areas outlined above but we must first unravel notions of 'customer service' to be able to analyse exactly what this term means and the

impact that associated discourses have upon organisational logics and employee experiences.

### **'Customer service'**

The term 'customer service' is loaded with meanings structured according to social, temporal and geographical location (whether you are customer or 'service provider'; whether you are 'service provider' but also customer depending upon occupation; and also whether geographically/physically one is in a 'service setting'). It is clear that retailers each have their own ideas over what counts as 'customer service', and for anyone who has ever been frustrated by the service - or lack thereof - in any given service encounter, it is clear that individuals also have their own expectations as to what counts as 'customer service'. Furthermore, when we begin to consider notions of 'good' and 'bad' customer service, a vast array of interpretations arise. Highlighting the complexity surrounding 'customer service' Wray-Bliss (2001) notes the existence of multiple and competing discourses surrounding the concept. These discourses range from managerial attempts to 'govern the soul' of employees (Rose, 1990) to offering potential for radical political change.

In order to maintain a clear perspective I chose to examine what 'customer service' meant at the organisational level (how the store as an organisation defined it) and also how employees defined 'customer service'. This chapter will illuminate the differences between customer service ethics in particular organisations and also how employees negotiate, interpret and resist these ethics. Some attention will be given to how workers maintain the ethic, whether

they hold similar views, or whether they think customers/organisations are asking too much of them. I found that staff often felt that they were taken-for-granted and at the most extreme claimed that customers/employers deliberately sought to take advantage of them or exploit their subordinate position. Consequently I investigated how staff reacted against this, how they dealt with 'problem customers' or problematic situations and what 'spaces for resistance' they had.

The stores that took part in my research were chosen on the assumption that the kind of customer service they provided would be contrasting but remain comparable. Wanting to uncover how stores and staff interpreted 'customer service' I decided to look at the concept at both an organisational and individual level. In order to grasp how each retailer defined customer service I chose to ask the main representative of those stores – the branch manager. Even though each manager gave similar responses in terms of aiming to provide 'good' service, differences in how they achieved this can be clearly seen:

**Jason (Manager, 'Legend'): our approach to customer service is quite relaxed, I mean we aim to provide a good service, by that I mean we like to give customers what they want...our customers don't want aggressive salespeople, at the end of the day we're Legend, we have a lot of customers passing through our doors everyday they just want to be in and out, or left alone to browse...being pleasant and friendly to customers, not harassing**

**them, basically we want them to feel welcome but have minimal contact.**

**Kelli (Manager, 'Croft'): we have a particular approach here to customer service, we like to sell, the company likes us to be up to speed on our products and the kinds of image we'll be putting forward season to season so we need to keep up to date on the fits of jeans and all the styles...I like to think that we're pro-active in terms of selling but not to the point where we're pushy...the service we provide is one of the best because our staff know the products we sell and are very friendly and helpful...that's the important thing really, we need to be seen as the friendliest and most helpful store so people want to come back...some stores can be a bit snotty...we don't have that here.**

**Dawn (Manager, 'Mojo'): I think with our level of customer service, customers get the real deal. I mean our staff are trained in all the labels that we stock and they know what's trendy, what the new fashions are because at the end of the day we aim to recruit staff that take an interest in fashion...so customers know they can ask 'what are the latest jeans...?' or if a mother comes in she can ask 'what are all the kids wearing...?' And they know they can trust what our staff say. Added to that, we don't just aim to be friendly and just stand there and smile, we train staff in every aspect of providing good customer service. There's the product knowledge, all staff**

**have to have a good working knowledge of the jean fits, of labels, things like label history, who particular labels aim their clothing ranges at, price ranges...then there's the way staff approach customers. We make sure they don't pounce on someone who looks like they just want to browse or someone who has kids in tow...this is an active sales environment and as a company we expect that staff will be actively trying to sell stock...but the last thing we want to do is to make people feel uncomfortable...I'd never want us to be like 'Croft', they're too much...yes we are a selling company, but you have to recognise that not all customers appreciate that and so you've got to know when to back off as well as when to really go for it.**

As we can see, each manager retains a positive view of their approach to customer service and these views can be held to be representative of how the organisations themselves wish their staff to engage with the public. Managers were the mediators of how the organisational ethic was translated to staff and performed on the shopfloor. In all cases workers were either given or shown a 'training manual' or 'policy and procedures' document during their training period, but the main guide (in terms of training and also policing) in performance was the management team. Before going on to examine the differences in each retailer's approach to customer service I would like to underline how each response above illustrates two key factors influencing how at an organisational level, retailer's decide what kind of service they want to be seen providing the

image the retailer wishes to portray of themselves; and the kind of service the retailer sees their target customers appreciating.

All three of the managers above explain their approaches to customer service in terms of the aims of their respective organisations and what *their* customers want. This underlines what Helman and De Chernatony (1999) found that the assumption made that the retail sector is homogenous is inaccurate.

Brand strategies vary according to the store and in line with the products being sold. Notably, we see a key element to this service at both 'Croft' and 'Mojo' involves providing the 'friendliest' service and that it is not enough to simply 'be friendly and just stand there and smile'. In addition these shops actively encourage sales and this perhaps falls more in line with Abiala's (2000) category of 'persuasive selling' - a possible by-product of the re-skilling of retail work as we see more men entering an increasingly stratified and economically competitive market. <sup>1</sup>

The need for pro-active selling and its increasing importance for retailers is illustrated in the comments of management below:

**Dawn (Manager, 'Mojo'): its so competitive out there now you have to be different...its more competitive for shops selling branded clothing because you can get the same thing in another shop...that's why your customer service is so important and having to make sales so that customers buy from you rather than someone else.**

**Jason (Manager, 'Legend') things are getting worse, its[the market] so unpredictable at the minute...everyone is trying to get ahead of the rest...before long you never know...we could end up more like 'Croft', or 'Mojo'...more active at sales...I'd think its unlikely we'd be exactly like that, but to some extent maybe...**

Here we can see that the manager of Legend has concerns over the unpredictability of the market and he highlights the possibility that 'Legend's organisational approach towards customer service and selling could, given appropriate conditions, become more like that at 'Croft' and 'Mojo'. These comments indicate the pressure managers were under and the increasing competition among retailers that would be originally aimed at alternative consumer groups.

Taylor (1998) suggests that 'quality customer service entails responding to, and anticipating, customers' needs and expectations thus ensuring satisfaction and loyalty' (1998: 88). Yet this fails to explore the actual practice and negotiation of customer service. Pettinger (2004) is one of the few researchers directly to interrogate customer service. Dissatisfied with previous typologies (i.e. Broadbridge, 1991)<sup>2</sup>, Pettinger develops her own schema of customer service based on variation among, and the contingency of, organisational sales strategies. She defines the 'service culture' (nature and extent of customer service provision) of retail organisations as 'the mix between three distinct components of customer service – self service, routine service and personal



service' (2004: 173)<sup>3</sup>. I think Pettinger is right to outline the alternative components here, but fails to apply the notion of 'persuasive selling' to retail. I will argue that persuasive selling is increasingly important for retailers given the particular economic climate and that its presence can be identified among certain shops. Pettinger is keen to underline that the service culture of shops is influenced by their brand strategies. This is a crucial factor determining the kind of labour workers perform as target markets effect 'how far self-service dominates over personal service' (2004: 175-6). Eager to frame her analysis within the economic aspects of the labour process Pettinger reinforces that:

*Customer service is in part an interaction between worker and customer but is framed by the "service culture" of the brand, expressed through the products, the store and the work that is involved in enabling service and resulting from the economic impetus of the organisation to sell. (2004: 180)*

In an alternative attempt to unravel what we mean by 'customer service', Rafaeli and Sutton (1990) analyse the effects of 'busyness' on the 'display of positive emotion' of staff in Israeli supermarkets. They 'measure' aspects of the staff-customer encounter (such as smiling, eye contact, thanking and conversation, 'pleasantness' of worker and 'attending' to customers). However, this research uses quantitative methods and I remain sceptical as to the utility this approach. Assigning a binary value (1 or 0) does not express or examine the depth that workers can engage with customers. Supermarkets are different to fashion retailers, and maybe this was more appropriate given the context of the

research – 1990's in Israel. The authors themselves recognise that 'western' service was more 'advanced' than that in Israel.

Nowadays (even in supermarkets) there has been a surge in engaging with customers. For example, during a recent shopping experience a checkout operator strangely asked me 'have you had your tea?' before proceeding to voice an opinion whether she liked the contents of my shopping trolley and if I wanted help packing (an occurrence becoming increasingly common of visits to a number of my large local supermarkets). An increasing feature of service work is this drive towards 'personal servicing' (Sturdy, 2001; Tyler and Taylor, 1998; Pettinger, 2004), or indeed 'persuasive selling' (Abiala, 2000), and this has been directly linked to the relative cost of the service itself (Tyler and Taylor, 1998). One thing that is apparent is that personal servicing is most prevalent where organisations are seeking to secure longer term relationships with consumers (Sturdy, 2001). Although an aspect of the overall brand strategies of organisations from airline operators (Taylor, 1998), call centres (Callaghan and Thompson, 2002) to the retailers considered here, it is clear that personal servicing/persuasive selling is ultimately an economic strategy employed to encourage repeat business and customer loyalty in competitive markets.

### **Conceptions of the customer**

Empirical work has focused on how social theorists and organisations conceptualise 'customers' or 'consumers'. Rosenthal et al (2001) point to the various accounts of the customer as: sovereign consumer, co-producer, emotional vampire, aggressor, management accomplice and governed object

(Du Gay, 1996; Gabriel and Lang, 1995; Rose, 1990). These conceptualisations are based on organisational prescriptions, employee experiences and cultural perspectives. Here I want to consider specifically how the customers are perceived at an organisational and individual level and then analyse the kind of power they held. In addition to this I will outline the difficulties they created for staff and the pleasures that workers derived from serving customers. This illuminates the extent to which organisational policies and procedures are directed by the 'quality-conscious consumer' (Du Gay and Salaman, 1992) and also how far this is translated onto the shopfloor via management and staff. This also provides an opportunity to expose the extent to which staff accepted, rejected or contested service cultures.

Across all three retailers there was an elevation of 'the customer' to a certain primary status. This was reflected in the emphasis placed upon giving customers what they wanted. However, caution must be taken here not to privilege the power of customers beyond that of the economic objectives of these organisations. The ethos of 'the customer was always right' prevailed, but this was challenged when organisational profitability was a concern (e.g. returning garments for refund/exchange)<sup>4</sup>. This reflects Korczynski's (2001; 2002) notion of the 'customer-oriented bureaucracy' whereby:

*in contemporary capitalism, service work is driven by a competitive terrain in which both service quality and price are key factors. There are both logics of customer-orientation (related to the service quality element of competition) and bureaucratization (related to the price element of*

*competition) underpinning service work. The concept of the customer-oriented bureaucracy is put forward as an ideal type of work organization in which these dual, and potentially contradictory, logics are simultaneously present. (Kerfoot and Korczynski, 2005: 390)*

This was a pattern across stores but one that varied given the economic power of the particular retailers. Both 'Legend' and 'Croft' were part of much larger chains than 'Mojo' and could afford to refund garments. 'Mojo', on the other hand did not refund at all unless garments were deemed to have a manufacturing fault. This returns policy was in accordance with UK statutory rights but formed the basis of a great deal of conflict between workers and consumers. Furthermore, all of the management were quick to decline 'returns' that fell outside of their policies (such as garments that had been worn, damaged or brought back beyond a certain time period). Therefore, we can see how despite a focus of giving customers what they wanted this was only acceptable as long as it did not contravene the bureaucratic logic of the organisations.

Discussion here will focus upon three discourses through which staff constituted customers at the level of personal experience. The first involves looking at customers as omnipotent or at the very least exercising power over workers in this environment. The second encompasses how workers spoke about customers as a 'problem' for them, either as a hindrance, or in personal terms. This is then organised into a typology of 'problem' customers. The final discourse involved seeing customers as a source of pleasure and enjoyment.

These discourses are by no means exclusive, and workers often spoke about how they simultaneously hated and enjoyed working in a customer-facing role. What they do highlight is the contradictory and tumultuous nature of staff experiences in these environments.

### ***Customers as powerful***

Workers were quick to point out how powerful customers could be and underline precisely that 'the customer is always right'. Here it is possible to understand how writers such as Du Gay (1996) see logics of the 'sovereign consumer' in operation.

**Steve (sales asst, 'Croft'): customers have all the power...like they can come in and do what they want...and you're not to upset them...just take it**

**Paul (sales asst, 'Legend'): its just the job you know, your there to serve them and be polite...the old 'customer is always right' thing.**

**Rachel (sales asst, 'Mojo'):...even when they come and mess up your entire section and are really rude and stuff...you've gotta just let them do it.**

**Arran (sales asst, 'Mojo'): they know you have to...do what they want...or they'll complain or kick off and you've got to deal with them...there's no escape**

We can see that the staff are fully aware, not only of the importance of pleasing customers, but also letting them 'do what they want' seems to be common. The unequal power relationship between worker and customer is outlined perfectly by these comments. I think the statements above also give a flavour of the resignation and injustice that can be felt by staff as created by their role as service provider. The workers keep reinforcing 'you've got to...', 'you have to...' and as we see Rachel is incensed by the unequal nature of her exchange of 'good service' for relatively little in return. However, although customers do occupy a certain privileged position as a result of their buying power, this does not mean staff passively accept or endure this. Workers could challenge customers, thus problematising notions that we live in the 'cult of the customer' (Du Gay and Salaman, 1992). I will discuss this later but first I want to outline the pleasure that customers can bring staff and also the problems they can pose.

### ***Customers as pleasurable***

Despite the hours and low pay, many workers do, in fact, gain some form of enjoyment from their work. Although in some cases this derived from the benefits they received from working in their respective shops, the main source of pleasure/enjoyment came from the performance of their role interacting with customers. This has been found in other research (Wouters, 1989; Rafaeli and Sutton, 1990; Fineman, 1993; Crang 1997; Abiala, 2000; Korczynski, 2001; Pettinger, 2005a)

**Phil (sales asst, 'Mojo'): I like the crack with people, I suppose I just like talking to people and that...**

**Craig (sales asst, 'Croft'): sometimes its sort of worthwhile when you get a nice customer who appreciates that you're being nice**

**Carl (sales asst, 'Legend'): the customers sort of break the day up...so no two days are ever the same...**

**Dominique (sales asst, 'Croft'): the customers give you two dimensions, like in one way you're glad of them, they can make it less boring and like you can talk to them about where they're going and who they're buying for and what they like and stuff...but then sometimes you just wanna smash their faces in [laughs]...literally...seriously**

Here we can see that any interpretation of service workers as 'dehumanized' (Hochschild, 1983; Ritzer, 1996; Bolton and Houlihan, 2005) is misplaced. Clearly workers gain a lot of enjoyment from working with customers, but are also able to inject themselves into their work, tailoring approaches and sales techniques in their own individual ways. Ultimately front-line service work involves dealing with the public and that provides a source of satisfaction for workers. This satisfaction comes from being appreciated, enjoying 'the crack' with people and breaking up the monotony of retail work. However, it is difficult to deny that front-line service work is always experienced positively by

employees. From the comment made by Dominique, customers can also be a source of intense frustration to the point where she wants to 'smash their faces in'!

### ***Customers as 'problems'***

Certainly as a worker (and even as an observer) some of the behaviour and actions of customers can be exasperating and annoying. But how do staff categorise customers as a 'problem' and what are the main themes of this as a discourse? Ultimately customers pose problems for staff in diverse ways. I have developed my own typology according to the responses of the workers.

Customers are subsequently categorised according to 5 potential positions: 'difficult returns'; 'time-wasters'; 'last-minute dawdlers'; 'riflers'; 'obnoxious twats'.

There was some variation on these themes, but as general categories, these distinctions facilitate analysis of staff's negative feelings towards customers. As we shall see, they also opened up potential avenues for challenging the customer service ethic through staff getting their own back or making customers feel awkward and uncomfortable depending on which position(s) the problem customer occupied. This typology is by no means exclusive, in that customers could move among the categories and occupy one or more (or even all!) at any one time.



### *'Difficult returns'*

This was a common form of conflict for all stores. Although because of their particular returns policies this was not as common a problem for 'Croft' and 'Legend', they still had to deal with difficult returns. 'Difficult returns' were characterised as situations when customers brought items back and wanted something in exchange that conflicted with the returns policy of the store. All managers dealt ultimately with these situations and all spoke at length of how sometimes 'shifty' customers can be unreasonable, aggressive and violent when they do not get what they want.

**Jason (Manager, 'Legend'): you get people wanting to return stuff that's blatantly been worn, sometimes they get feisty when you won't give them what they want...I've been threatened before.**

**Kelli (Manager, 'Croft'): it's the pushy, nasty ones that you watch for, like if they're looking shifty or get angry straight away you know something is up, so you take your time and look at the items closely, if its been worn, or like if they want an exchange or refund you'll not credit it and all kinds of hell can break loose.**

**Dawn (Manager, 'Mojo'): oh I've had it all. All kinds of difficult returns. Some customers get really angry, aggressive and nasty. They can threaten you...waiting outside to chin you or take it further...sometimes you need to radio for security...I've even had to be escorted to my car before.**

These comments indicate that customers can often turn aggressive and even violent when they are unable to return items for exchange or refund. Notably, these managers highlight how customers threaten them to the extent of needing to radio for further assistance from shopping centre security guards and even request an escort after leaving work. Customers falling into this category would at the least cause a scene, and at the most extreme threaten physical violence. Out of all the categories, 'the difficult return' held the most potential for challenging staff. Having to deal with this behaviour, although not uncommon, took its toll on the managers and often affected the mood of the shop. Sometimes management would back down and refund or exchange for customers who made enough fuss just to get rid of them, but this would have repercussions as the management team would often refuse to serve these people in the future and had the power to bar them if they wanted to. The way workers coped with these situations followed a conventional pattern. Subordinate workers would often fall silently into the surroundings, finding some task to occupy themselves with until the situation was resolved. In this way they were kept out of the firing line while the manager took the brunt of the customer's anger and frustration. Management would assess which way was best to resolve the situation quickly and according to the returns policy. After a difficult return had been resolved (quickly or at worst with the aid of security), staff would use humour as a way of venting their own frustration or dealing with their emotions. In this scenario all of the workers seemed to play a part, collectively reassuring each other of the unreasonable nature of some customers.

### *'Time-wasters'*

'Time-wasters' were more shop specific, being seen as more of a problem where personalised service and 'persuasive selling' were prominent. At both 'Croft' and 'Mojo', workers got 'pissed off' by time wasters because they took up a portion of their time, made them work just as hard and yielded little result in the way of sales. Hard work goes unrewarded and leads to frustration.

**Arran (sales asst, 'Mojo'):...[laughs] sometimes you get total twats in...and I hate them ones that you serve for ages and get loads of sizes and work your bollocks off and then they say 'oh I'm not sure, I'm gonna look somewhere else'...that's really...it pisses me off**

**Craig (sales asst, 'Croft'):...some people do just waste your time, that's crap cos like you put in the effort and it all goes to waste and the other staff have been serving and getting sales and you've got nothing to show for spending a long time with someone...if I think someone's taking the piss I'll go and say to Kelli, like 'I hope this guy gets something I've been with him ages', just so she knows I'm serving and trying rather than doing nowt...**

Here we can see from Craig, that time-wasters can even place them under the scrutiny of management as the consequences of spending too much time with someone who does not eventually buy is detrimental to their purpose of maximising sales. This of course, contradicts the service culture of the shop which emphasises providing the 'friendliest' service. Staff cannot provide the

'friendliest' service if they are concerned about converting time spent with customers into sales. Consequently staff in pro-active selling environments prefer customers who buy, and do so quickly. Time can be spent providing personal and persuasive selling, but this must be qualified in respect of exchangeable value for the worker or organisation. Workers spent a lot of time with customers if they thought they would spend a fortune, or if they had some other form of investment in doing so, for example if they were a regular.

#### *'Last-minute dawdlers'*

These customers were seen as annoying and infringing on the personal time of workers. 'Last-minute dawdlers' were shoppers who came into the shop just before closing and delayed the closing time of the shop. This forced workers to stay beyond work hours. This was never an extensive time period, but was keenly felt by workers as they resented having to stay after closing.

**Diane (sales asst, 'Legend'): I hate it when people come in last thing...they've had *all day* to shop and come in just before you shut...it's a nightmare (emphasis hers)**

Again, this was common for all the workers and was frustrating for workers at all levels as not only did this hold up the sales assistants, but also the management who had to cash up at the end of each shift. This would often lead to workers rejecting the service and sales ethic of their organisations (even for management) as they would make all efforts to hurry a purchase or encourage the customer to leave.

### *'Riflers'*

'Riflers' were customers who would come into a shop and turn a section into a messy jumble with minimum effort and alarming speed given the actual time it takes to fold an entire section neatly. Gemma's comments below are typical of the frustration this causes staff when they spend a large proportion of their time tidying and folding. This is seen as showing a total disregard for the time and effort taken to produce visually attractive and size-ordered merchandise.

**Gemma (sales asst, 'Mojo'): don't get me started...like when they come in and mess your jeans up and you've taken like 4 hours refolding them...you're like this [grits teeth and clenches fists]...they do your head in...**

**Jade (sales asst, 'Croft'): people don't care really...they're shopping...some people are like 'sorry I messed your piles up' and then you don't mind as much cos they at least acknowledge it and that you've spent time doing it...it's the ones that just come in and rifle and make it a shit-tip without a second thought...**

We can see here that when customers do recognise that they've 'messed your piles up', this is experienced as less obtrusive and inconsiderate than those who simply 'make it a shit-tip without a second thought'. In this way, staff appreciate when customers show regard and consideration for the work they do and are frustrated when this is unrecognised or disregarded.

*'Obnoxious twats'*

Within this categorisation, staff spoke of variation but the unifying factor was that customers could be nasty, make staff feel 'thick', be patronising and rude. This was further compounded by the lack of reactionary responses available to staff. Instead, staff had to hold fast to the service ethic.

**Jade (sales asst, 'Croft'): sometimes they think they know everything and act all superior as if your some sort of...sub-species because you work in a shop...but I'm in college...I'm probably brainier than loads of them but they just think your thick or something because you work here.**

**Arran (sales asst, 'Mojo'): you can't say what you want to, you've got to stay all polite and that, even if they're an obnoxious twat, you've got to take it...**

In this scenario, workers see customers as problematic when they use their privileged position to take advantage of the worker's subordinate position. Seemingly, workers based this on customers acting 'superior', or thinking they could do what they like because the workers had to serve them or remain polite. This caused great frustration for workers who felt they would not tolerate similar behaviour outside of work, but nevertheless had to put up with it in this environment as part of their occupational role.

However, as we shall see, staff were not total 'victims' to this sort of treatment. Resistance and contestation are possible in service settings (Rafaeli and Sutton, 1990; Crang, 1997; Taylor, 1998; Mulholland, 2004; Pettinger, 2005)

and certainly were evident within specific parameters here. Workers found ways and 'tactics' to either withhold/withdraw service, sought support among colleagues or to get their own back through bitching or humour. Before looking at this however, it is useful to outline the level of control and surveillance that workers can be subject to in service work settings.

### **Resistance and control**

There has been increasing research and documentation of control and resistance within the service sector. This has focused on managerial surveillance and attempts to guide the service encounter along organisational lines, multiple sources of employee regulation (Seymour and Sandiford, 2005), the struggle for control and power by employees, as well as the means and ways staff resist regulation and avoid/negotiate surveillance and monitoring (Mulholland, 2004; Taylor, 1998). In this section I will outline managerial control and surveillance and how pervasive these were before going onto discuss the way workers resist this control and contest the dominant service culture. This encompasses the workers motivations for doing so and the scope they have to exhibit challenge and resistance.

There has been considerable attention focusing on the way 'service work' opens up the possibility for employee 'empowerment', autonomy and self-actualisation through being able to incorporate themselves and their own interests and ideas into the service they are employed to provide. However, this is criticised by Taylor (2002) who is sceptical of the extent of employee freedom and autonomy. Workers do have a certain level of freedom to express their

personalities through their work role in service environments, but this is circumscribed by organisational aesthetics, aims and objectives.

### ***Control and surveillance***

Control and surveillance of employees was both overt and covert by management. Management would routinely observe staff and check their work to assess how well they performed tasks and as a service provider. In addition, the appearance and 'attitude' of workers was also closely monitored. A further avenue for employee surveillance was also operating at both 'Mojo' and 'Croft' through monitoring individual staff sales and their ability to meet targets. These three key areas formed the basis of managerial control and surveillance across the stores and although part of the overall monitoring process, I will consider each one separately here.

### ***Tasks and service provision***

All managers were required to monitor sales staff. This was part of their supervisory role in the workplace and formed part of their regular activity. However, once workers established themselves as good, reliable workers then surveillance of their interaction with customers or job tasks was reduced or even non-existent. However, all workers when they first start their employment are given training in how to perform job-related tasks (e.g. re-stocking, merchandising, inter-branch transfers etc.), service provision and monitored closely. After this initial period, management will assess whether a worker is in need of further training, performs perfectly well or is 'unsuitable' for the company. How management interpret and classify workers at this point is



critical to subsequent levels of surveillance for that worker (if indeed they have their contracts renewed). Many workers were deemed capable after the initial training period and so were left to get on with tasks when allocated them. It seems once workers are able to 'prove' themselves, then management could focus their attention on other things (or workers).

Management saw this form of monitoring as crucial to the effective running of the store, maintaining that lack of surveillance or correct training would lead to chaos:

**Jason (Manager, 'Legend'): you've got to make sure they know what they're doing...mould, train and watch them right from the start...otherwise they do things half-arsed and it slowly builds up until eventually the whole shop is falling down around your ears...**

**Kelli (Manager, 'Croft'): the temps need to be watched constantly because they don't give a shit but even some of your permanent staff need a kick up the backside from time to time if their standards are slipping...else before long the place is a shit-tip...**

Constant monitoring of how well staff perform tasks is seen as fundamental to ensure the store runs efficiently and smoothly. Although many staff can be trusted to carry out jobs to the manager's satisfaction, certain workers can be seen as having to be watched all the time or given a 'kick up the backside from time to time'. Temporary workers fall into this category and so find themselves

subject to intense scrutiny, however, as Kelli indicates, some of the permanent staff can find themselves the focus of surveillance 'if their standards are slipping'. This can be dangerous for workers as it can be construed by management as laziness or incompetence and even jeopardise the worker's position:

**Dawn (Manager, 'Mojo'): Wayne's been working himself lately, his absences are getting bad, but his restocking is really sloppy...he misses entire labels...I think its laziness because he's proved he can do it right, but I caught he'd done it wrong before and so kept checking and each time I've found something's been missed...I have to check each time now...I can't rely on him...and what with his absences clocking up I'm going to have to review his situation here...**

In this instance, Wayne's job is in jeopardy because management surveillance has revealed he is not performing according to management standards. Picking up on the 'sloppy' restocking has led to Dawn classifying him as lazy. This is reinforced by his absences 'clocking up'. Taking these two factors into consideration, Dawn is reviewing his position with the company. So although this kind of monitoring may seem relatively innocuous, it can lead to further scrutiny of workers and eventually place their jobs at risk.

### *Appearance and attitude*

When outlining the kind of person you needed to be in order to work in retail, both staff and management gave accounts fraught with contradictions. These contradictions were based along two main lines:

1. you need to possess certain characteristics, and be a particular 'type of person'.
2. anyone could do this kind of work with the right attitude, correct training and after a certain level of experience.

This contradiction was interesting and could highlight how retail work maintains traditional ideas over personal characteristics needed for particular jobs and at the same time reflects how the industry is becoming increasingly specialised. During the course of my research there were a number of fears that the continuous fall in high-street sales would lead to the first 'consumption-led' recession. Thus in the lead up to Christmas all stores increased their levels of staff training. This training was seen as a means to an end – highly trained staff = highly effective sellers = higher profits. Each store had their own approach to training based upon their customer service ethic and their sales ethic.

In terms of controlling and monitoring the aesthetic labour of employees, managers began this process through their selection procedures. Similar findings are observed by Callaghan and Thompson (2002) and Warhurst *et al* (2000). Only people who met the aesthetic criteria of each organisation were successful in gaining employment. This was assessed by managers on the

basis of appearance and attitude or personality displayed during interview or when applicants enquired about jobs in person.

The following are excerpts from the assessment criteria given to managers by the organisation in order to make appropriate selections when appointing staff. At 'Legend' candidates must show 'commitment to customer service, flexibility, energy...passion...smart appearance'. 'Croft' applicants must demonstrate 'sense of style, attention to detail and customer service know-how'. At 'Mojo' candidates must 'be fashionable, ideally wearing our brands..."look the part"...should be able to sell themselves – if they can't, how can they sell our stock? If they are shy, they won't be good sales people...responsible, loyal and fun.'

At both 'Mojo' and 'Croft' in the job description notably essential requirements were to be 'fashionable' and show 'obvious interest in appearance'. For 'Legend' essentials were geared towards previous experience or demonstrating commitment to customer service. Being fashionable or having 'sense of style' were key requirements for croft and 'Mojo'. This is perhaps unsurprising given that both 'Mojo' and 'Croft' were more trend-focused stores, however what is interesting is how this is translated into selection and forms the basis of permanent surveillance.

Maintaining appearance in line with company aesthetics was a key feature of work for all employees. Failure to do so would jeopardise their employment. This is an element of work for many employees across occupations, but is

more clearly marked for those working in a sector where aesthetics and fashion are being sold. For employees at Legend, uniform requirements meant that workers had to wear 'smart' clothes and have a 'smart appearance'. Men had to be clean-shaven and women had to wear make-up. For both men and women, hair had to be clean and tidy (although 'tidy' generally translated into styled, as many hairstyles were deliberately choppy, asymmetric or messy). The key factor here was that workers could not look too extreme. Visible piercings (with the exception of earrings for both women and men) had to be removed for work and any tattoos needed to be covered at all times. This was typified by two cases at 'Legend' when workers had piercings or wanted to have one done:

**Anthony (sales asst, 'Legend'):** I was dressed right, suit and that, but soon as I came in Jason was like 'you can get that out!' (pointing to his eyebrow piercing)...so I had to take it out and I couldn't wear it to work...he pulled me on it later and was like 'you know you can't come in like that'...I wear it outside work though.

**Jason (Manager, 'Legend'):** I overheard one of the girls chatting saying she wanted that lip thing done...you know the one between the nose and lip...like a beauty-spot...I butted in and was like 'get that done and don't bother coming back in you know the rules'...she started joking and stuff but I let her know I was serious...the staff can't have metal hanging out their faces its not in the company's image...

Similar restrictions were placed on the workers at 'Mojo' and 'Croft'. This was a complicated issue as some piercings were allowed in these shops. For women, navel piercings were totally acceptable, as were pierced eyebrows and noses. However, any form of lip piercing (even though pierced tongues were acceptable) or 'out of the ordinary' piercings were prohibited.

In the case of tattoos, a similar surveillance process was apparent. Tattoos were allowed to an extent but this depended on the individual, the type of tattoo and its location on the body. Again this appeared to be gendered as women were allowed to display delicate or small designs on appropriate body areas (such as ankles, wrists, lower back or hips). Anything that was deemed to be large or vulgar or inappropriate needed to be covered-up. For men, it was acceptable to display tattoos on the forearm and have any designs peeping out from under a t-shirt. However, again this was policed according to certain aesthetic standards. Any tattoos showing had to be tasteful and not vulgar:

**Dawn (Manager, 'Mojo'): I don't mind tattoos as long as they look ok and are properly done and look tasteful, at the end of the day they're fashionable these days and loads of lads and lasses have them, as long as its nice stuff and not football badges or like death, goth, grim reaper stuff or cartoon characters, like the girls getting 'twee pie' on their shoulders and boobs or like stuff charvas would have...like boyfriends or girlfriends names, 'Mam' or 'Dad' on the knuckles...tribal symbols can be ok depending on the size.**

**Kelli (Manager, 'Croft'): with tattoos it depends, some look really nice, but the girls need to be careful, nothing that makes them look rough and likewise with the lads I suppose, lads tend to be able to cover theirs anyway with t-shirts...sometimes I'll ask to see a picture first or ask about it if I get wind one of them [staff] wants one done.**

Here we can see management control and surveillance over the adornment and decoration of worker's bodies. This had some level of impact on the practices of staff because if they wanted a tattoo or piercing they needed to make sure they could cover it up, or adhere to an unspoken code governing what was 'tasteful' and 'appropriate'.

Both tattoos and piercings are representative of the most extreme forms of bodily decoration and display encountered here and surveillance and control over these practices was strict and ad-hoc. Rules and action could range from mild disapproval to dismissal but were always dependent on organisation aesthetics subjectively translated through the eyes of managers. However, there was also intense policing of the everyday bodily regimens of employees including hair care and styling, shaving, makeup, skin care, self-tanning and clothing.

Again surveillance and control in this respect was highly apparent across all stores, but this was at its most extreme where staff were given the freedom to wear their own clothes and where being fashionable was a job requirement.

This does not ignore the fact that at 'Legend', 'looking smart' required a lot of work on the part of employees. Performing aesthetic labour in Legend demanded a commitment to appearance and hygiene. This level of commitment requires a great deal of labour involving daily shaving and hair styling, as well as ironing, dry-cleaning and the economic resources needed to maintain a weekly wardrobe of clothing, necessary grooming products and equipment. However, workers at 'Legend' identified that they had a 'work wardrobe' and 'personal wardrobe'. These workers did not wear the same clothes inside and outside of the workplace and would also change how they styled their hair and makeup, as well as alter their appearance with jewellery, choose not to shave etc. this was different for employees at 'Mojo' and 'Croft' because they were hired on the basis of being fashionable and expected to dress for work wearing the same things they would wear outside of the workplace.

In both 'Croft' and 'Mojo', workers found themselves under intense scrutiny by management regarding their appearance. This is underlined by the fact that in these shops it was relatively common for staff to be given warnings or even disciplined over their appearance. In the majority of cases, management control was exerted through informal warnings. However, continual failure to meet aesthetic standards (ultimately, subjectively set by management) would result in the surveillance process evolving into formal warnings and disciplinary procedure:



**Dawn (Manager, 'Mojo'): Wayne came in unshaved the other week and I had to pull him for it...and then again this week, I'm gonna have to start giving him formal warnings for it...it doesn't help that he doesn't always wear appropriate stuff, he's beginning to look a mess, if he's not careful he could go...I had to have a word with Aleasha as well cos she wasn't wearing any makeup and it just isn't good enough...**

**Kelli (Manager, 'Croft'): we might seem strict but its all about image in fashion and if someone looks a mess or like they should be working at primark then something has to be done...they all have to be wearing the right thing, for the girls...nice makeup and hair, none of them awful fake tan jobs, it has to be done properly else they just look dirty or crap...for the lads, again, nice hair, it can be messy, but as long as it looks styled, clean-shaven or like styled beards, nothing that looks like they just can't be arsed to shave...**

Clearly staff must maintain high levels of bodily appearance to the extent that even messiness needs to appear cultivated and styled. In addition to the scrutiny of bodily maintenance, management also exerted huge control over the material presentation of the body through clothing.

As staff were given greater scope to wear what they wanted at 'Croft' and 'Mojo', this resulted in greater policing over their clothing choices. Workers were expected to wear the brand/s that the store sold and when they did dress in

other labels, these had to be concealed with no visible branding on display. Unlike 'Legend' where trainers were strictly prohibited, 'Croft' and 'Mojo' allowed workers to wear trainers but these had to be 'fashion trainers' and not sports trainers. As well as these restrictions, there was also an informal criterion that workers would wear clothing appropriate to the store:

**Kelli (Manager, 'Croft'): I know we sell shorts and vests but I'll only let them [staff] wear things like that in the summer...it'd be daft if they wore them in winter, even though its warm in here [shop]...lads can only wear flip flops in the height of summer...and like the girls...they can't be too revealing or look cheap or tarty...**

**Dawn (Manager, 'Mojo'): the staff can't be charvers, no 'Henri Lloyd', no 'Lacoste', except for the polo t-shirts, no 'Rockport' or stuff like that...**

In a bizarre twist, even though 'Mojo' actually sells all of the labels that Dawn here describes, the staff are prohibited from wearing them because it would conflict with the image of its workers that the store wants to present. We see this mirrored in 'Croft' where Kelli highlights seasonal transitions in uniform specifics and the need to present a respectable image by policing the appearance of 'the girls'. This is further augmented by the aesthetic labour requirements of the stores stipulating that staff must be fashionable or have a sense of style. Applicants failing to meet these criteria are unlikely to be hired

and workers must continually produce themselves as aesthetically appropriate to maintain their position.

Although appearance was vital, attitude was also a crucial aspect for managers when hiring and monitoring existing staff. In a small way, attitude was also tied into appearance. Where workers were seen as not paying attention to their appearance, this was translated into not having the right attitude to their work or job. However, attitude was also viewed by management as something separate from appearance. Workers could be seen as looking great but lacking when it came to work ethic or service provision. It is interesting to note that attitude was also linked to various aspects of personality such as being outgoing or shy, paying attention to detail, having fun, being loyal to the company etc. Callaghan and Thompson (2002) found that personality is given priority in the recruitment process: 'to management good customer service requires a positive attitude and, importantly, this cannot be taught, it is part of someone's personality (2002: 240).'

Characteristics of 'having the right attitude' were store specific, but overall, attitude was seen as crucial to individual performance and ultimately job security. Commonly, enthusiasm and energy were key traits, as well as being hard-working and a 'team-player'. Scrutiny was no less apparent in any one store illustrating the value attached to worker's attitudes. Nevertheless, as the work role involved greater variation in 'Croft' and 'Mojo', workers in these shops had to display the right attitude *in more ways* than their counterparts at 'Legend'.

Being more involved in producing a formal aesthetic and enabling self-service, workers at Legend only had to maintain an enthusiastic façade through tidying stock and being polite to customers. Although this was no easy feat given the often repetitive and tedious nature of retail work, 'Legend' staff had relatively little to be concerned with compared to those at 'Croft' and 'Mojo'. Workers in these two retailers were much more hands-on with the overall running of the stores and although this provided respite from boredom and a source of creativity and interest for the staff, it also gave management increased scope to scrutinise their employees. If staff were reluctant to clean ('Legend' had separate cleaning staff), appeared bored or failed to occupy themselves during a quiet shift, were ineffective at serving customers or failed to meet sales targets, all of this could be subsumed under not having 'the right attitude'.

**Dawn (Manager, 'Mojo'): some of these kids, they just won't pick up a cloth and dust or clean a mirror...if you've got to keep telling them to find jobs to do then they haven't got the right attitude...staff like Arran have the right attitude, he keeps himself busy...will find things to do when its quiet and then get in there and get the sales when the customers are in...and if they're reluctant to approach people...shy or something then they're not suitable at all...**

**Kelli (Manager, 'Croft'): you can train people a lot of the time but if they haven't got the right personality or attitude then it's a waste of time and you've got to cut your losses and sack them...a bit of willingness is essential...if someone doesn't make target but you**

**see them racing about after people then its ok you've seen them working their backside off...that's the difference...**

Displaying the right attitude counts for a lot in this sort of environment and can even negate deficiencies in other aspects of the job role. Failure to do so inevitably counts against workers regardless of their experience, competencies or aesthetic capital. At 'Croft' and 'Mojo' this extends to a worker's willingness to approach customers and ability to meet sales targets. Although Kelli states that effort and attitude can compensate for failure to meet sales targets, this does not last for long. Ultimately staff at 'Mojo' and 'Croft', despite their importance in producing the aesthetic of the store, are employed to maximise profitability through actively chasing sales. In these stores an employee's ability to reach targets is closely monitored and it is to this area that I will now turn.

### *Meeting targets*

Ability to meet targets was a key aspect of the work for employees at 'Mojo' and 'Croft'. This aspect of service work in general has been researched by a number of previous authors (although this has focused primarily upon call centre labour). It is equally worthwhile to note the shift towards monitoring productivity in terms of sales conversion rates as it applies to retail workers.

Workers at 'Mojo' and 'Croft' were given sales targets that they had to meet as part of their role. These consisted of a breakdown of shop targets to the level of individual sections and staff. Workers at 'Croft' and 'Mojo' had daily, weekly and monthly targets. Staff recorded their sales either in a sales book or

electronically as they processed sales through the till. These sales were then monitored by management to assess how well staff performed. Any workers failing to meet targets on a regular basis or with poor overall sales would be questioned by management as to why they were underachieving. This was important because consistent failure to meet targets could lead to the beginnings of disciplinary action and dismissal. Alternatively, management could force workers into resignation. Part-time workers on 'zero-hour' contracts who continually underperformed could find their hours being seriously reduced to the point where they would have to quit and find a job with more paid hours. However, despite this sounding severe, if these retailers found they had a tough week or month (in terms of sales), then workers could be excused for having poor sales. Similarly, in the case of 'zero-hour' staff, reduction of hours was only exercised as a last resort following further training and monitoring for signs of improvement. In addition, staff often found ways to avoid these situations in the first place or to improve their performance and escape focus (if only until the next time!).

However, this monitoring process was not completely negative. Staff derived positive outcomes and could use their ability to surpass targets as an exchangeable commodity. The most obvious benefit staff received for beating targets came in the form of a financial bonus added onto their monthly wage. In addition, regularly meeting targets would result in a decrease in overall surveillance on their work by management as workers became established members of the team and trusted to get on with minimal supervision. This also meant that any given day/week or month that workers failed to make target

could be written-off as simply a 'blip' or 'one-off'. Becoming established also carried with it a certain level of esteem. This also became the source of an informal exchange between particular workers and management:

**Kelli (Manager, 'Croft'): some of your staff, like the better sellers, you might reward them, give them like a couple of Saturdays off or lay off the late-night shopping shifts once in a while just to let them know you value them...**

**Dawn (Manager, 'Mojo'): when it comes to the hours, my best staff...you do end up doing favours...I'll try and give them some of the nicer shifts...around holidays and things group their days off together so they get a mini-break or if they want to change hours for something they wanna do outside work then I'll do a favour for them cos they work hard and I appreciate it...this job can be shit so you try and cut them some slack where you can...**

So making targets carries its own benefits for staff as well as the organisation. Despite this, however, failure to meet targets leads to workers being scrutinised by management and consistent underachieving can place employee's jobs at risk. Consequently, any benefits that employees derive from meeting targets are structured according to the organisational aim of economic productivity. Even at the level of informal exchange where managers may try and 'cut them some slack', workers must impress upon management that they are worthwhile and valuable workers in terms of their ability to achieve sales. However, in this

next section, I will underline that workers can also fake sales to avoid surveillance and generate esteem from management. This forms part of various 'resistance/desubordination strategies' used by workers within this context.

### **Resistance and De-subordination**

As we have seen above, retail employees are subject to a large amount of surveillance and monitoring. This may only apply to policing the aesthetic labour of workers but for some workers extends to include their ability to regularly meet sales targets. However, employees find ways to resist such heavy surveillance and develop strategies to avoid monitoring where possible. Workers even managed to display resistance to the service and sales ethic in subtle ways and often collaborated with each other forming 'tacit alliances' (Mulholland, 2004) and 'communities of coping' (Korczynski, 2003). Similarly, they engaged in acts of 'de-subordination' (Miliband, 1978) in an attempt to counteract their multiple subordinate positions. Consequently there were various ways in which resistance or de-subordination was displayed by staff during the course of my research. Here I will focus upon the way staff actively resisted the service and sales approaches adopted by their employers as well as their de-subordinate behaviour in relation to management and customers. These forms of resistance may specifically apply to either the service or sales ethic, but in some cases they can be a countermeasure against both.



### *Misinformation and withdrawing service*

This set of practices was usually reserved for dealing with problem customers. Workers would use a variety of tactics to avoid serving 'obnoxious twats' or 'last-minute dawdlers'. This took the form of swapping sections with other members of staff, finding some sort of task to perform off the shopfloor or deliberately lying about stock information. In this way, workers were able to avoid difficult situations and encourage customers to leave the shop. This mirrors the type of resistance found among the call centre workers in Taylor's (1998) study. Here he found that some agents disconnected calls from rude or ignorant customers, withheld relevant and important information from offensive callers and often spoke to such customers in a 'distant' or disinterested manner' (1998: 96). In this environment, workers have to deal with customers face-to-face and so do not have the ability to simply terminate interaction in an instant using the telephone. Instead workers would avoid contact or expedite the departure of particular customers. This actively challenged both the service and sales ethic of the worker's organisations as this type of behaviour is neither 'good service' nor maximising sales. This was also tolerated by management as they could not fully understand workers' motives and even shared them. In some cases, managers actually promoted these practices depending upon the situation and so were also part of the resistance to organisational logic or 'de-subordination' in relation to the 'customer'. This was most evident when dealing with extremely rude customers, or those who cause a scene in the shop, in which case managers would excuse this on account of the benefits for getting these customers to leave the shop. However, it was also the case with 'last-

minute dawdlers' as they delayed the closing of the shop and consequently any end-of-day duties managers had to perform such as cashing-up or admin.

### *Harassing customers*

This practice was usually reserved again for 'last-minute dawdlers' and was used in a deliberate attempt to make customers feel uncomfortable and thus leave the shop. In a collaboratively staged performance, workers would co-ordinate 'attacks' on customers to speed up a purchase or leaving:

**Arran (sales asst, 'Mojo'): aarrghhh, I hate people who come in last thing...we all go round and attack them, harass them...they get hit from all angles...you'll split up so there's staff all around so they can't hide...sometimes just standing right next to them works...or everyone will approach them so they get sick...you know what each others thinking soon as it hits five-to and if it happens we just have to look at each other and everyone knows what to do...**

Here Arran describes this situation and the kind of co-ordination involved. The emphasis is on creating discomfort and actively making people want to leave. He indicates that sometimes he can intimidate people into leaving simply by going and 'standing right next to them' but that this can also involve a collective strategy. This was so developed that the staff knew what to do and how to organise themselves to best effect simply by looking at each other. Again, this is an active challenge to the ethics of service and maximising profits.

### *Faking sales*

At 'Mojo' and 'Croft', as the monitoring of sales placed workers under added pressure compared to their 'Legend' counterparts, this led them in some instances to fake sales (an activity noted elsewhere with respect to call centres, Mulholland, 2004). This activity was taken very seriously by management and could even lead to disciplinary action being taken. However, among staff this was something many of them engaged in, as long as it was restrained. Workers only had a problem with their colleagues faking sales when it broke an informal code of ethics among themselves governing the making of sales:

**Gemma (sales asst, 'Mojo'): everyone writes down an odd one [made up sale] now and then...or like if you're on the till and you've seen a customer help themselves...so you're not taking someone else's sales...you'll write it down...its if someone is obvious or takes it too far so they look amazing and you look shit, then you'll complain about it...or sometimes you'll just say something a bit snidey or bitchy but a bit jokey, y'know, to them personally so they get the point...that way we don't all get analysed and found out...**

**Jade (sales asst, 'Croft'): I think everyone lies about sales to some extent, you get quite good at it actually, like don't go overboard...but you'll watch who's been served and who's just pulled something off the shelf, after a while you either remember codes of things or you can wander over and get it later on...and I'm**

**pretty good at judging blokes sizes now or you look and see which size is missing from the pile, then no-one can prove you're lying...**

We can see here that faking sales involves skill and tactics as well as knowledge and judgement. Workers learn how to fake sales and when it is appropriate to do so and also by how much. The comments made by Gemma and Jade were largely representative of the other workers at 'Mojo' and 'Croft'. There was a certain understanding among workers in these shops whereby they all knew each other would fake sales, but did so inconspicuously so as not to raise management suspicions and consequently heighten surveillance. The understanding appears to be based on moderation and only faking sales to boost an individual's sales figures and thus avoid any negative attention from management. However, there is a line that workers must not cross. When faking sales, workers cannot 'go overboard', be 'obvious' or use this as a technique to elevate themselves above their co-workers. If anybody does lie about their sales to the extent that other employees 'look shit', then this will be met with direct complaint to management or dealt with informally through 'snidey', 'bitchy' but 'jokey' comments between co-workers. The latter here involves a form of self-regulation among workers in order to avoid 'total surveillance' by management.

### *Sharing sales*

As with faking sales, workers were also found themselves collectively responsible for each other. Going against the idea of individualised targets, workers would often share sales with each other in order to protect any one

individual from the negative attention of management. This was a regular practice for established workers who found themselves helping out new-starters or colleagues who were struggling to make targets.

**Phil (sales asst, 'Mojo'): its not all "dog-eat-dog" like...I'll let one of the others have a sale if I know they're doing crap, or if you've made target and someone else is way off then you'll swap sections or pretend your busy and gift a sale to them that way...its ok cos you know they'd do the same for you...**

**Siobhan (sales asst, 'Croft'): sometimes new people find it hard so you'll help them serve people and close a sale and then say 'you have that one'...if I'm well over target I'll leave serving and find something like cleaning to do so the others focus on their sales...**

Clearly, as Phil states the existence of targets does not create an atmosphere of 'dog-eat-dog'. Instead a certain level of support exists among co-workers so that sales are distributed among each other. Notably this occurs when the individual has already reached target or if someone is doing considerably worse than themselves. In this way, management monitoring of individualized targets is compromised and the organisational aim of maximising profits is challenged as the more effective sellers may 'retreat' from serving to boost underperforming co-worker's chances of making target.

### *Doing it your own way*

Another way that staff displayed resistance to the sales ethic was through privileging customer service over the focus on targets. This has been documented elsewhere by Sturdy (2001) and Wray-Bliss (2001). In particular Wray-Bliss highlights that the discourse of 'customer service' can be used by individual workers to privilege the values of 'care, responsibility and service' and thus 'destabilise' the 'amoral regularity of organisational control' and management focus on sales (2001: 52).

A similar challenge was found among the workers at 'Mojo' and 'Croft' who found themselves locked in the contradictory logics of quality service and quantity of sales. During fieldwork it was evident that workers found customers to be a source of pleasure and a welcome diversion and so spent a great deal of time chatting to customers as well as trying to sell them clothes. However, spending too much time with customers could lead to low productivity if customers do not spend any money or simply buy a t-shirt after taking up 30 minutes of a sales assistant's time. However, despite the pressure to achieve targets, workers would often take time with customers and would use this as an excuse when their sales were low. In some cases, workers even privileged this attention to service at the expense of prioritising sales in a direct challenge to the organisational ethic:

**Dominique (sales asst, 'Croft'): I like spending time with customers, and if it means my sales are low then its tough, Kelli sees you serving and as long as she's happy you're a good worker then she**

**can't complain, they can't have it all, its not a supermarket conveyor belt no matter how much 'Croft' wants to make money, if they want you to give good customer service then I'm sorry but that means you spend time with people...**

**Neil (sales asst, 'Mojo'): having a bit crack with customers is canny, it can make the job bearable...if anyone gets on your case about crap sales I always say "well you see me having a bit banter, you know I'm serving"...people know now that these shops make you sell, so you've got to have a bit banter, a bit crack, spend some time with customers, especially your regulars so they'll keep coming back...**

Both Neil and Dominique cite the discourse of customer service here as an active tool against the organisational drive towards sales. As workers they enjoy contact with the public that this type of work offers. In this sense, the appeal that these workers make to the notion of service acts as a buffer to the potentially dehumanizing aspect of target-orientated sales work.

### *Informal Code of ethics*

This point relates to the previously mentioned 'faking' and 'sharing' sales, but here I want to focus more closely upon the ethical pursuit of sales or more precisely the informal and implicit rules governing 'stealing' sales. There appeared to be an implicit code of ethics that restricted the actions of workers with regard to 'stealing' sales. This operated on the basis that once a member

of staff was serving a customer, another worker could not then intervene and steal the sale. Other workers could become involved in the act of selling to an individual customer, but this would be taken as assistance and thus not a sale that they could claim. Alternatively, staff could intervene in order to 'rescue' a sale but would back-off and let the co-worker who initiated the approach record the sale. The latter was often a form of support provided for new employees or for co-workers who perhaps did not share the same product knowledge about specific products.

In addition, Workers at both 'Croft' and 'Mojo' were encouraged to establish rapport with customers in an attempt to encourage repeat business. Established workers built up their own body of 'regulars' that they would routinely serve. Strict rules governed the interaction between workers and each others regulars. Workers who recognised a colleague's regular customer would be reluctant to serve them, instead choosing to inform the co-worker in question. As a last resort an employee would serve someone else's 'regular' but would not try and 'steal' them as well. This situation would often form the basis of mild in-fighting or frustration on the part of those who felt someone was in fact trying to steal one of their regulars. This was rare and only ever occurred if the status of a customer as someone's regular was ambiguous or if staff were oblivious to a co-worker's claims upon a customer.

#### *Support from colleagues/customers*

As we have already seen, colleagues can provide support through helping their co-workers in a variety of ways. This was not only apparent from the practice of



sharing sales and other activities, but also through emotional support. This further challenged the service and sales ethic as a group solidarity formed. This kind of support is not isolated to this study. Korczynski (2000; 2001) also observed extensive peer support through 'communities of coping'.

Resistance was evident through trying to cheer other workers up if they were having a bad time, covering for each other if a colleague had a hangover or failed to follow correct procedure. Furthermore, workers would also swap shifts with each other for individual needs and thus undermine management attempts to 'push' someone out of their job. However, support did not only come from colleagues. Customers could also act provide a certain level of support. This came in two forms. Firstly, those who felt they had received excellent service (and generally this was customers who had taken up a large proportion of a worker's time) would often commend particular workers to management. Again this challenges the sales ethic of shops like Mojo and Croft as customers offer praise for quality service delivered through workers spending time with them (although this can simultaneously further other organisation directives as it falls in line with the competing customer service ethic). Secondly, customers offer support to workers by acting as a buffer in difficult situations. This was most apparent after a 'difficult return' or dealing with an 'obnoxious twat'. Customers would provide support through humour or empathy:

**Rachel (sales asst, 'Mojo'): customers can be canny and know what you're going through, like if one customer is kicking off or being a dickhead...I've had another customer say something, like 'god how**

**do you cope?’ or how they over-reacted or say something funny or ‘eee it must be awful for you’, it helps you get straight back into it instead of getting all flustered.**

In this way, Rachel demonstrates how customers can help alleviate difficult situations. This challenges the service ethic as customers share disapproval of particular behaviour and consequently the doctrine of ‘the customer is always right’. In a bizarre twist, and in response to unreasonable behaviour on the part of other shoppers, customers become complicit in challenging their own status through offering support to workers. However, we could also suggest that this represents a confirmation of status as the ‘canny’ customers distance themselves from the ‘dickheads’. In this way customers enable workers to resume their labour performance and alleviate awkward or difficult situations. Therefore any disruption to the environment is quickly resolved so that workers can ‘get straight back into it instead of getting all flustered.’

### *Bitching and humour*

In a similar way to the support offered to workers by shoppers in difficult situations, colleagues also managed to boost each other through bitching and joking either about management, work or customers. The practice of ‘bitching’ was widespread and, coupled with joking, appeared to be fundamental resources in relieving boredom, helping to pass time, but also to challenge the authority of management and power of customers.

This is something that remains under-researched, but that we can excavate from the work of Willis (1977), and more recently from Rafaeli and Sutton (1990) who found that employees could display 'good cheer' but remain 'generally insulting throughout the conversation' (1990: 629). In a more contemporary study, Taylor (1998) discovered among his Travel Sales Advisors that:

*Two-fingered salutes and the mouthing of obscenities to the telephone, or the rolling of eyes to colleagues when in conversation with passengers, were also very common. (1998: 96)*

In a similar way, the retail workers here would find ways to bitch, swear or joke about customers, work and other things. This acted as a buffer to the awkwardness, embarrassment and indignation that staff encountered through dealing with rude or aggressive customers.

**Paul (sales asst, 'Croft'): sometimes customers just get right on your tits, like if they come in shouting the odds at you or treat you like shit, you can't say stuff to their face so you'll call them a wanker behind their backs or take the piss after they leave...**

**Lyndsay (sales asst, 'Legend'): sometimes you just have a good bitch about nasty customers...**

**Phil (sales asst, 'Mojo'): I suppose I bitch about customers quite a bit, especially if they've pissed me off, I'll bitch about them to someone, only like somewhere quiet though, behind their backs of course (laughs).**

**Arran (sales asst, 'Mojo'): sometimes I'll just be dead blunt if someone is aggravating me...like say 'oh that's obviously not gonna fit why don't you try the xxi' or like 'wow someones been piling on the pounds over Christmas I think you're gonna need a bigger waist mate'...but I'll be a bit jokey with it so they don't know how to take it but they'll go red or embarrassed...**

Here we can see how bitching and 'taking the piss' are used to express frustration created from dealing with rude or 'nasty' customers. This is often carried out without customers knowing, but as we see with Arran, workers can even be bitchy to the customer's face as long as remarks remain ambiguous or are disguised through humour.

### *Work avoidance*

During fieldwork I observed many instances where employees actively sought to avoid work. In a similar way to the Irish call centre workers that Mulholland (2004) studied, staff at all 3 retailers in this research found ways to waste time or avoid work. This also echoes Miliband's argument that 'de-subordination' in the workplace is most prominent at the point of production (which for retail organisations is the shop environment). Opportunities arose that enabled

workers to disappear from the shopfloor, if only for five or ten minutes. In addition, certain employees found ways to smuggle their mobile phones up into stockrooms. Shut away with their 'contraband' they would perform a task as quickly as possible before using their mobiles to text friends or download content for their phone. Similarly, workers who smoked would often volunteer to take the rubbish out into the service yards so that they could have an extra cigarette break while being paid for the time.

This work avoidance was often an activity that took skill and something which, when manipulated correctly, workers could even gain esteem with management as they looked eager to keep busy or help organise the shop. Of course all of this relies on a worker's ability to fool management and in the case of one worker, a high level of planning:

**Craig (sales asst, 'Croft'): I'll deliberately take me time doing things...folding, cleaning and that...then when I'm up in the stockroom...I try and ask if I can be there...sorting it out and stuff...I'll nip in the cupboard and nab me phone...then race through stuff...every now and then ring the cash desk with a question...and come down every so often with stock...so it looks like your really busy, but just race through it all and sit and text our lass or me mates...**

This echoes Willis' (1977) research and the way that 'the lads' developed ways to waste time and 'have a laff'. Although Craig was an extreme case, elements

of this sort of behaviour were evident among the staff as a whole. These techniques of finding ways to waste time and avoid work were not only forms of resistance/de-subordination to management control and surveillance, but were also coping mechanisms developed to relieve boredom and monotony.

### *Aesthetic challenge*

In addition to employee resistance to managerial control over their time and work, workers also found ways to challenge the aesthetic element of their labour. In a similar study of female retail workers, Pettinger (2005a) found that uniform regulations were not always strictly followed. According to her, workers often 'added to their uniforms', or wore accessories that were not part of the uniform (2005a: 470). My findings reinforce this as workers on many occasions pushed the boundaries of the 'aesthetic' aspect of their labour.

As workers were required to wear particular labels and look a certain way, this type of challenge had to be negotiated carefully. Sometimes, employees would wear something they knew was not allowed but managed to escape sanction. On other occasions, management made allowances, such as if a worker had blisters (or in one case, a male worker who had sustained a black-eye from a drunken brawl). In these circumstances, employees could be allocated stock room duties or admin work off the shopfloor. At the extremes, management would send workers home without pay until they returned appropriately dressed or even begin disciplinary proceedings that could lead to dismissal.

This illustrates that although workers *can* challenge organisational aesthetics, resistance is limited. Although workers at all three retailers would challenge the aesthetics demanded of them by the organisation, scope for resistance varied among the stores. At 'Legend', the requirement to wear a suit or maintain an 'office-type' appearance meant that workers had little opportunity for variation. As we have seen earlier, the employee who pierced his eyebrow had to quickly remove it when the manager voiced his disapproval. Workers managed to challenge the aesthetic to a certain extent by wearing bold colour combinations and funky/inappropriate accessories (one member of staff found the fact he got away with wearing his risqué 'Paul Smith-naked lady' cufflinks hilarious) as well as 'trainer-shoes' instead of smart shoes.

In comparison, scope for resistance and challenge of the organisational aesthetic at both 'Croft' and 'Mojo' was far greater. In line with the work of Foucault (1988), as workers are given greater freedom to wear their own clothes, this freedom becomes the focus of intense scrutiny and surveillance. Wearing the 'right' clothes and accessories are an integral feature of the aesthetic labour of workers at 'Mojo' and 'Croft'. Therefore management surveillance of staff clothing is unsurprising. What remains interesting is the dynamic nature of management surveillance. Once a worker had proved that they could sufficiently self-regulate their appearance, then management scrutiny was reduced.

Notably, it is through attempts to challenge and control the aesthetic element of their labour, that workers made the most significant impact upon organisational

aesthetics. As fashions and styles change, so too does the physical appearance of the staff body at 'Mojo' and 'Croft'. Following emerging trends can be a risky process for workers, as management acceptance of particular fashions as 'appropriately aesthetic' can be turbulent. This gradually becomes less subversive as the buyers adapt to new trends and assemble collections that ultimately mirror contemporary fashions. However, the cycle begins again as workers follow and introduce current trends into the shops in which they work. The demand for them to be 'trendy' thus opens up possibilities for employees to challenge and influence organisational aesthetics and maintain control over how they dress and style themselves.

However, a cautionary note must be emphasised at this point. Despite the subversive potential of staff challenges to organisational aesthetics, it is the organisations that ultimately benefit. Hiring staff who are 'trendy' leaves a great deal to interpretation by management and opens up possibilities for workers to bring their own styles into the workplace. But we must not forget that workers exchange their aesthetic capital as part of their labour. Challenges to organisational aesthetics act as a means to 'keep in touch' with trends and target markets. Thus the subversive potential of aesthetic challenge is diminished as organisations capitalise upon the 'trendiness' of their workforce using it as a resource for legitimacy in a fast-paced and forever-changing fashion market.



## **Concluding remarks**

The opening of this chapter outlined the complexity of the concept of 'customer service'. Wray-Bliss (2001) suggests we can never know what customer service is. Although I agree that the scope for alternative definitions and interpretations is vast, we must not surrender in the face of adversity. This chapter has interrogated 'customer service' through analysing academic debate, but also by considering uses of the concept in organisational practice and employee definitions. The aim here has been to illuminate definitions and the practice of 'customer service' within the fashion retail sector. The diversity of service work means that other sectors must be analysed according to their specific context. Nevertheless, I think it is important to compare sectors in order to establish where change begins or fails to occur. We have seen the fragility of retail markets as consumer spending fell dramatically during this research. As the manager of 'Legend' underlines, such factors can have serious consequences for organisations and lead to re-evaluations in terms of their approach to service in an increasingly competitive market.

Previous authors underline that the 'quality' of interaction between workers and customers is a key aspect of competition in the contemporary service industry (Fuller and Smith, 1991; Rosenthal *et al*, 1997; Thompson and Findlay, 1999; Sturdy, 2001; Taylor, 2002). A consequence of this has been a number of initiatives undertaken by management to encourage employees to be 'genuine' and 'natural'. These initiatives have been labelled 'employee empowerment' (Taylor, 2002). Despite the fact that some may see such developments as opening up opportunities for the 'self development' and 'self actualisation' of

employees (Allen and Du Gay, 1994) this can also create predatory relationships between consumers and service providers. As the capitalist profit motive continues to dominate the economy, so too does it structure the playing field between customers and service employees. The retail sector is driven by achieving and surpassing sales targets. Workers find themselves subject to the surveillance processes of organizations in which performance and productivity are measured through an individual's ability to meet daily sales targets. This is compounded by delivering a service to 'demanding publics'. Emphasis on targets whilst simultaneously encouraging workers to develop a 'natural' sales technique results in workers locked in a battle of manipulation with customers.

In 1978 Miliband projected that de-subordination would become an increasingly prominent feature of life in Britain. The data presented here suggests that it is certainly a key feature of contemporary retail work. Miliband claims that de-subordination can take a variety of forms, that it can incorporate collective and organised political action but can also remain individual and lack clear political motive. Conceptualising what many have called 'resistance' in such a way is useful for considering worker's refusal to accept their subordinate positions in an industry where collective political action remains scarce or non-existent. Despite the differences between all three stores compared in this research, the 'resistance/de-subordination strategies' that workers engaged in shared similarities and this may extend beyond fashion retail. Through incorporating 'de-subordination' with accounts of 'resistance' in the contemporary workplace we can gain a more comprehensive understanding of how workers react to

their subordinate status in similar and contrasting ways across a variety of sectors and industries.

In this context, workers do have ways to resist and spaces where breaks in performance can occur, but these are still constrained by the worker's subordinate position. However, if we consider Mulholland's (2004) arguments that collective worker resistance contradicts notions of increasing individualization of worker experience we can gain insight into employee rejection of organisational values. Workers do not necessarily stand alone. They form 'tacit alliances' (Mulholland, 2004) with colleagues, but also with customers. As customers empathise with workers and vice versa, this opens up potential to challenge organisational logics and notions of 'sovereign consumers.' In some ways, this understanding between workers and customers can be the source of immense pleasure for workers and when we consider that many workers enjoy serving people, we can see that definitions of service work as dehumanising and purely negative are too simplistic.

## Notes:

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<sup>1</sup> Previous research already outlines the way men entering occupations can appropriate forms of 'skill' and how 'skills' are gendered (Cockburn, 1983; 1985). Cockburn's work suggests that the social organisation of labour results in men being able to define the 'skill' components of particular jobs. These 'skills' are built upon notions of the male body and (real or assumed) male competencies. This leads to women becoming excluded from the category 'skilled' and certain kinds of skill being seen as naturally adhering to men.

<sup>2</sup> Broadbridge includes in her definition 'product knowledge, efficiency, patience, submissiveness, pleasantness, friendliness and an attractive appearance' (1991: 46)

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<sup>3</sup> Pettinger draws on the work of Abiala (2000) to develop this typology. 'Self service' covers simply setting out stock and enabling customers to 'serve themselves' through re-stocking, size-ordering and tidying (this is increasingly being extended to self-service checkouts). 'Routine selling' involves a certain level of contact with customers. This is where staff serve customers on the till and may also incorporate staff helping customers to find things or provide them with sizes. 'Personal service' encompasses the interaction between staff and customer and involves tailoring service to suit individual customers such as offering advice and opinions and engaging customers in conversation and 'banter'.

<sup>4</sup> Thus reflecting Korczynski's (2001; 2002) notion of the 'customer-oriented bureaucracy'

## **Chapter 6: Open all Hours? The fluidity of service labour**

### **Introduction**

For many people a clear line exists between their work lives and their 'private' or social lives. However, for certain retail workers the divide between work and leisure is unclear. Elsewhere, other authors have touched upon the fact that some workers continue to perform emotional labour outside of the workplace, in their own free time (Abiala, 2000). However, this appears to be something that they discover but do not focus on. Where research has examined this, it has looked at the 'labour of aesthetics' of those involved in 'style industries' (Witz *et al*, 2003) or the domestic labour of wives and mothers (James, 1989). Focus here will be upon the extent to which work and non-work filter into each other for these workers and how far they continue their labour performances outside the work environment.

The chapter begins with a discussion of conceptual difficulties regarding the distinction between work and non-work as it applies to retail workers. Having considered these issues, I will analyse particular aspects of retail work that illustrate the permeable boundaries between work and non-work. These areas will include consideration of the sociability of employees and how this is appropriated by organisations before looking at worker's subjective perceptions of their *self* or personality and the cultural value that workers attach to being fashionable.

In addition, if we are to truly expose how far work and non-work can become analytically indistinct, we need to see other examples of how 'work' and 'non-work' filter into each other. This can be achieved by examining the outside interests of the workers and the extent of 'permeation' between these and their work. The extent of these examples was vast, however two were recurrent – drinking/clubbing and sexual relationships. These will be explored to further highlight these so-called 'fuzzy boundaries' between work and non-work before looking more specifically at how certain retail workers continue their labour performances outside of work.

As we have seen previously, in shops like 'Croft' and 'Mojo', the tangible products are not the only thing being sold. Instead, workers sell their gendered and sexualised identities as well as their aesthetic capital and 'trendiness'. As workers establish connections and relationships with customers they are recognised outside of work and feel compelled to continue their labour performances:

**Greg (sales asst, 'Mojo'):** I do get sick of it like, blokes coming up to you thinking you're their best mate cos you've served them a couple of weeks ago or something, but you have to go along with it, besides, if you can keep it up it's the easiest way to get regulars.

**Dominique (sales asst, 'Croft'):** if you don't humour them they might be arsey with you next time they come in the store or just shop somewhere else...

**Gemma (sales asst, 'Mojo'): you can't just cut them dead if a customer comes up to you when you're out drinking, people would think I was a right stuck up bitch...They'd never come back [to 'Mojo']**

This illustrates that although workers can use relationships with customers as a resource for increasing productivity this can be a double-edged sword.

Relationships result in work transcending the physical workplace and becoming 'mobile' as workers continue their labour through the relations they have established. This is necessary to maintain relationships with customers, maintain face and avoid complaints or difficult situations at work in the future.

More concerning, however, for the men, this kind of work left them open to confrontation and physical violence. Similarly, the female workers who also felt compelled to continue their sexual servicing while out drinking felt that their occupation exposed them to greater risk of sexual harassment. These issues point towards an alarming trend for particular frontline service workers to surrender themselves to the 'sovereign consumer' (Du Gay, 1996; Du Gay and Salaman, 1992) or 'demanding publics' (Williams, 2003). Despite this, establishing relations with customers and maintaining them is not always so oppressive. In some cases the 'fuzzy boundaries' between work and non-work were enjoyable and conferred particular individuals with status but this also had potential to inflict 'hidden injuries' upon the workers in the study.

## **Work/leisure divide**

When looking at work we need to understand that the concept of 'work' is problematic theoretically, but it also becomes difficult to apply practically and analytically to service sector occupations. Theorists will be drawn upon here to outline arguments that the distinction between 'work' and 'non-work' is difficult to maintain in certain occupations. Discussion will then focus more specifically on how the boundaries between these two concepts can be permeable in relation to these retail workers and how their labour becomes 'mobile'.

### ***The blurred boundaries of 'work'***

Glucksmann (2005) attempts to gain a more accurate sense of how work and non-work activities are inter-connected. She argues that we need a more 'inclusive' approach to work that incorporates 'all labour activity' as it occurs across socio-economic spheres (2005: 28). Furthermore, Glucksmann suggests that the 'boundaries between socio-economic modes have always been permeable' as work activities traverse different 'domains' (2005: 28). She goes on to outline three ways in which it becomes difficult to separate work from non-work activities. In the first instance, Glucksmann recognises that it is difficult to differentiate some forms of labour from non-work activities or relationships (particular examples would include care work, domestic labour, and work in pre-industrial/agricultural societies). The second area that Glucksmann concentrates upon is 'emotion work' and includes:



*jobs where in addition to emotions, aesthetics, interpersonal skills, and/or sexuality comprise...essential component[s] and are combined with technical and professional competencies. (2005: 32)*

Glucksmann suggests the proliferation of 'emotion work' has accompanied the expansion of service industries and the 'new economy'. However she also points out that similar attributes inherent in 'emotion work' have always been 'presupposed by far more traditional (usually female-dominated) occupations such as nursing, hairdressing and beauty therapy (Sharma and Black, 2001) and paid care work (James, 1989) (2005: 32).' Although this may be true of 'traditionally female' jobs, we can also propose these characteristics have been evident in certain male-dominated occupations as well. The work of Salesmen, Barbers and Tailors involves similar attention to personal attributes and interpersonal skills. Glucksmann should not be so hasty to equate service work and associated skills and competencies with female-dominated work.

The third area Glucksmann considers is 'consumption work'. Through this she explores the 'work' involved in consumption practices and whether such work is extending into new arenas. She suggests that routine practices such as shopping, grooming, and appreciating cultural goods...

*...can be interpreted as work, consumption, leisure, or an undifferentiated combination of these. Buying and using goods and services often requires labour to be undertaken in addition to whatever gratification, pleasure, fantasy or desire are also involved...moreover, the*

*ability to engage in consumption practices often relies on developing and acquiring specific knowledge and learning specific practical skills.*

*Therefore, consumption itself can necessarily involve a great deal of work or labour (as well as forming the basis of paid labour – personal shoppers, museum guides/art gallery guides etc.). (Glucksmann, 2005: 33)*

This is an important point and one that will be applied further on in the chapter as workers invest a great deal of time in their appearance and therefore their ability to perform aesthetic labour. These retailers demand a certain aesthetic labour over the presentation of the workers' selves while at work which produces the need to have a well-stocked and 'appropriate' wardrobe. We have already seen in earlier chapters how taking an interest in fashion and aesthetic production of self becomes an exchangeable commodity in this particular employment market. The workers' pre-existing interest in fashion/appearance or their specific aesthetic disposition enables them to gain employment for these fashion retailers which then further enables and feeds into this interest/disposition.

Although the workers have a very firm grip on the dividing line between work and non-work, fashion and appearance for aesthetic labourers appear to cross-over into both spheres. However, although Glucksmann's work is useful in exploring the blurred boundaries between socioeconomic spheres, her work does not adequately account for the location of individuals in wider social

structures (e.g. gender, class, age ethnicity etc.) and how these influence people's subjective experiences.

### ***Bringing things and people together***

Wendy Bottero (2005), also problematises the distinction between work and non-work, but does so through the lens of class analysis and, in particular, social distance theory. Although she tends to focus upon the social networks of actors and how they influence the position of occupations in a stratified hierarchy, we can use this analysis as a tool for examining further, the way that work and non-work are inter-connected. For Bottero, all jobs are:

*embedded in wider social relationships, and the meaning of holding a particular occupation is strongly affected by the social identity, networks and life trajectory of the people in that job. This means that the distinction between jobs and incumbents, between work and non-work, and between the 'economic' and the 'social' is necessarily blurred. (2005: 56)*

In this tradition, exploring social space requires mapping how networks of social interaction foster relations of social closeness and distance, such as patterns of friendship, partnership and cultural similarity. This gives rise to a particular version of stratification and of the reproduction of inequality. Bottero sees occupations as 'integral elements of a space of relationships' rather than 'as aspects of a prior economic structure that determines social identity and behaviour' (Bottero, 2005: 57). She identifies Bourdieu as the most famous proponent of social distance approaches<sup>1</sup>. In his work, Bourdieu remarks that

'taste is what brings things and people that go together' (1984: 241). According to Bottero, occupation is the 'tag by which the social interaction distance method locates an individual's place in the social hierarchy' (2005: 62, emphasis original). Emphasis is not on labour market location but rather on patterns of social distance or proximity in relationships. If occupations are seen as integral elements of a space of social relationships, then the hierarchy of occupations is not

*given in their pay, skill or employment conditions but instead derives from the typical patterns of social relationships within which such occupations are located and take their social meaning (Bottero, 2005:62)*

Stratification then, is not just a relationship to the labour market, but a consequence of the

*close social relationships in which individuals are located. This is important because how individuals react to the same working conditions or level of pay is likely to differ according to their wider social circumstances – their life course stage and social obligations, the family relationships they are engaged in, their social background, past experience and their expectations of the future (Bottero, 2005: 63).*

This is useful in discerning what initially attracts workers to fashion retail (and specific shops) despite the relatively poor pay. In addition, the social distance perspective enables us to understand how these workers can still derive a certain level of status or cultural/symbolic capital as a result of the deployment

of their 'tastes' and dispositions in markets that see aesthetic attributes as having a high exchange value (Skeggs, 1997; 2004). Similarly, looking at the wider social circumstances is vital in analysing the subjective experiences of those involved in such work. Many of those in my research spoke of work in terms of their life stage and intended career trajectory. Retail was for many, a temporary solution and formed part of a long-term career plan either leading towards other forms of better-paid customer service work, or other occupations, in similar or alternative industries. Many of the workers were young, still in school, college or at university. In addition, some workers found that fashion retail fitted in with their overall social life and social milieu. Again, a unifying characteristic here is age. Younger workers saw this kind of work as offering them particular perks and fitting into their overall life stage and leisure activities – going out drinking, fleeting sexual encounters, keeping up with music etc.

**Kelly (sales asst, 'Croft'): Its nice, like some of my friends work at supermarkets and I'm like the cool one with the nice clothes, in the nice shop, selling nice things...with loads of fit blokes around me and not dealing with old biddies buying peas...**

**Neil (sales asst, 'Mojo'): the discount means I get to buy really expensive stuff quite cheap so I can look the business and women like a man who looks good...and your mates are all jealous of the stuff you wear...**

**Gemma (sales asst, 'Mojo'): its good cos we get like priority passes for the nightclubs just cos of the shop...and you get to know the promo girls and lads so you know which nights are the best...can get on the guest list and that...**

Many of the younger workers chose this kind of work because it gave them a level of status among their social groupings. Fashion retail held status compared to working in a supermarket, as a waiter/waitress or in a fast-food chain. These findings are interesting and I think require further consideration because they highlight the position of younger workers in the employment market, but also the contrasting status and potential for cultural exchange-value that particular occupations hold for different age groups. The majority of the workers that took part in this study were aged between 16-27 years old. This was also stratified according to store with 'Legend' having on average the oldest workforce (average age of 26 years old) and 'Mojo' and 'Croft' having the youngest workforces (average ages of 17 years old and 21 years old respectively).

The reasons for this trend for young workers are varied but I will focus on those that were most relevant here<sup>2</sup>. First, young people help to produce the brand image of the store as 'young', 'fashionable' and 'trendy'. This has a direct influence on managers recruiting in shops like 'Mojo' and 'Croft' where the aesthetic labour of workers is crucial in producing the aesthetic of the shop. Older workers were found at 'Legend' because they were positioned more closely with the store aesthetic.

Second, there seems to be a hierarchy in terms of low-level service work among the workers in this study. Fashion retail was seen as holding higher status than some of its alternatives – fast food chains, supermarkets etc. This is important because it helps to illuminate the location of particular jobs within the employment market and the status that workers derive from working in certain sectors and for specific retailers. Although many of these lower-level service jobs share characteristics, the key difference appears to be the product. Fashion and style are important for many young people. Workers are saved the embarrassment of having to wear 'uniform' and instead get to look 'smart' or 'trendy' at work. They are surrounded by fashionable clothes, see the new stock first, and get personal discount which, in most cases, is taken advantage of to the extreme. This meant that younger workers can derive status from their occupation as it exists among a hierarchy of jobs available to them and their peers. This status is not necessarily a result of income levels, but can also be attributed to the cultural value attached to certain occupations, goods and lifestyles among specific social groups.

Returning to Bottero, this is where her analysis is useful analytically as she enables us to account for the blurring between work and non-work and the social relationships that workers have outside of the workplace. In addition, social distance theory also allows us to consider the cultural and symbolic value employees can attach to working in fashion retail as opposed to other forms of retail, and the cultural significance of working for different retailers, selling particular brands and labels, and the proximity that many workers feel to the

customers they interact with. All of this is positioned within the particular life stage or life course trajectory of individuals, allowing for variation over time and social circumstance. Other work has also considered the importance of relationships or 'sociability' within the retail setting and it is to this I will now turn.

### **Sociability**

Pettinger (2005b) focuses on friendship and sociability within the workplace and argues that the relations established at work with colleagues indicate that a re-evaluation of the concepts of 'public' and 'private' needs to be configured. She found that social relations between workers contribute to the selling environment by 'enforcing and enhancing particular forms of sociability on the shopfloor...creat[ing] 'atmosphere' for customers and 'team identity' for employees (2005b: 39).' Furthermore, she highlights that

*being sociable with colleagues demonstrates workers' ability to be sociable with customers and may produce a socially homogeneous shopfloor, as friendships are based around an affinity between like-minded people. This can aid stores in performing their branding strategy...as it means the workforce can be configured as part of how the brand is performed on the shopfloor. (2005b: 39)*

In Pettinger's research, sociability has an instrumental aim in contributing to the organizational success in two ways. Firstly, it contributed to the creation of a relatively socially homogenous workforce that suited the brand strategy and targeted customers by including and excluding workers from the dominant



social groupings. Secondly, the sociability of workers could be harnessed to enhance customer service provision. By performing sociable relationships with customers, largely through chatting to them, workers contributed to the store ambience and to customer service<sup>3</sup>.

Looking at relationships between customers and workers, Pettinger (2005b) usefully returns to Marshall's (1986) ethnography of bar and restaurant work. In this research Marshall stresses how the boundaries between workers and customers are permeable, in particular, that workers become consumers at certain times precisely because of the friendships and social interaction that are critical to doing bar work. He concludes that there were 'fuzzy boundaries' between work and leisure: through the fusion of work and non-work lives in particular workplace environments. Pettinger also discovered these fuzzy boundaries to be present in the retail spaces she investigated, but she sees more opportunities for them to exist in bar work, as her retail customers were 'more likely to be strangers than "regulars" (2005b: 46)'. This is interesting because the high street retailers that I consider appear to be organised according to alternative brand strategies compared to those in Pettinger's research. In my research, workers at 'Mojo' and 'Croft' *did* have 'regulars' and relied upon building up their own set of regular customers to help achieve sales targets. This was not something they perceived as active, but instead as a gradual process:

**Siobhan (sales asst, 'Mojo'): its funny, you do get your own regulars – god that sounds awful...like a prostitute or something,**

**but its true. You start recognising people and they feel comfortable with you and I think trust you more and ask your opinion more...**

**Neil (sales asst, 'Mojo'): I always serve this one woman, she makes a beeline straight for me if she wants anything, I can always get her to buy two things, she never just leaves with one thing...it's cool because you get to know them and what they want, and maybe don't feel as frightened coming in here...feel more at home because they know me...we've all got our regulars, it just happens in this work...**

From these quotes we can see that forming a base of regulars is not necessarily perceived as an active achievement, as Neil points out 'it just happens', but this is could be an inevitable by-product of the brand strategies of shops like 'Mojo' and 'Croft'. Consequently, building up a body of regulars might be an active achievement even though workers do not always recognise it as such. Having regulars was a common feature of the working lives of 'Mojo' and 'Croft' employees however I did not find the same true for 'Legend'. Although some workers in 'Legend' did say they recognised regular customers, they did not speak of them in a possessive sense, or anywhere approaching the same extent as 'Mojo' and 'Croft' workers. So what is it about the brand strategies of 'Mojo' and 'Croft' that promotes relationships with customers? I think two factors are crucial: the strong emphasis on customer service and target-driven sales approach, and the cultural and symbolic value attached to the products sold there. The common element in both of these is pressure. For staff, the pressure

was to achieve sales targets and be seen to provide good customer service. For customers, pressure existed through being subject to such target-driven approaches, and in choosing the 'correct' labels and styles. This is made clear through referring to customers as having to 'feel comfortable', being able to 'trust' staff and feeling 'frightened' of the consumption space.

This is not always a one-way process however, or even one that workers can always enjoy or receive the benefits of friendship, Abiala found that

*Customers may be trying to fulfil general social needs that are not normally a part of the service encounter. They might want to talk about themselves and their lives in a way that, for the service worker, becomes a hindrance to her work. They make efforts to change the relationship into a friendship by contacting the service worker after work. Drawing a line between work and private life becomes an issue. (2000: 209)*

Therefore, we need to be careful about over-emphasising the positive nature of performing sociability in the workplace. Although she did consider negative and detrimental aspects of sociability among workers, Pettinger fails to consider the effect that such contact with customers has upon workers. As Abiala suggests, customers may seek to develop the relationship they have with the worker. This can take its toll on workers, something that I will discuss later in the chapter. However, now I wish to focus more closely upon my own research and the subjective perceptions of workers concerning their self and personality across work and non-work spheres.

## **Self/personality**

Any kind of work that involves emotional or aesthetic labour performances necessarily involves personal investments be made on behalf of the labourer. Whether that be the invocation of feeling in order to make others feel at ease, to simulate certain feelings, emotions or behaviour, or working on one's appearance to maintain an image in keeping with the aesthetics of the workplace. Although research in this area has pointed to the ability of service workers to put on an 'act' or performance (either to their detriment – Hochschild, 1983; or enjoyment - Wouters, 1989; Williams, 2003), I wanted to explore how much of themselves workers inject into their workplace performances. Workers find the distinction between 'real' and 'false' performances difficult to make, but can maintain a clear grasp of instances or situations where 'performances' may be more of an elaboration of their selves or personalities rather than a completely false act:

**Rachel (sales asst, 'Mojo'): sometimes I'm a bit over the top I suppose, but I'm just a friendly, loud person anyway, its still me, however much it might be an exaggerated version of me...**

**Kelly (sales asst, 'Croft'): I might be a bit more outgoing on the shopfloor than outside of work I think...just because you have to be...I'm not dead shy or anything but...outside you can be quiet when you want and loud when you want...**

**Lee (sales asst, 'Legend'): you've got to be more smiley and patient, but then I think I'm a bit like that anyway...**

These comments suggest that workers perceive their personalities or dispositions as inherent aspects of their selves, but that they exaggerate or emphasise certain elements to meet the requirement for aesthetic labour. This also echoes the work of Taylor (1998) who similarly found that employees were able to distinguish between 'the self being presented at work' and their 'personality' outside of the workplace. However, from the comments above we can also see that the workers identify as being *already* friendly, loud, outgoing, 'smiley' or patient. This emphasises that many of the workers found the kind of demeanour and attitude required of customer service and pro-active selling jobs as relatively easy to produce or perform. In line with feeling an affinity with the kind of work they performed, many of the workers also found a great deal of affinity with the store they worked for. This follows on from work by class analysts that taste brings 'things and people' together (Bourdieu, 1984; Prandy, 1999; Bottero, 2005).

Each of my stores was aimed at comparable but contrasting target markets. The age range of the consumers was largely similar, but differences can be located in the garments they sell (fashion labels or their own branded clothing), their economic exchange value and also their cultural value. Add to this the contrasting store aesthetics and brand strategies, and we can suggest that workers can have a high level of personal investment in association with particular brands and stores. As Pettinger points towards 'branded stores' and

'branded workers', we can propose that certain shops carry particular status alongside their 'brand' and this gives *social meaning* to the workers as they experience and construct this 'branding'.

In addition, workers communicate with and meet other people/customers face-to-face. Their interaction is not mediated by technology as with say, call centre workers. Staff and customers have faces, bodies and personalities. The situation may be completely different in other service jobs, but at least for these retail workers, they feel they are not totally devoid of the freedom to express themselves through work and to establish relations with their customers:

**Sean (Sales asst, 'Croft'): I like being able to be myself...talk with customers about DJs or bands and stuff...relate to people who like the same things as me...I see this one guy every week at 'Hed Kandi'<sup>4</sup>...he recognises me and asks if we've got anything nice in lately...I usually get him to come in and see me and I'll sort him out with something...**

In this comment Sean highlights another theme that was prevalent among the workers – 'being yourself'. This was manifested through the interaction between worker and customer – not coming across as 'false' or looking as though working on commission. But primarily, this was verbalised in terms of appearance and lifestyle, whether workers could 'be themselves' through their stylised identities and leisure preferences or if this was circumscribed by the organisation aesthetic.

### *Authentic fashions and authentic selves*

It seems strange that authenticity be such a pivotal force, especially in a service industry selling 'fashion'. However, the maintenance of distinctions in terms of aesthetics, style and 'taste' clearly show that fashion is about maintaining social groups (Hebdige, 1979; Crane, 2000). During the course of my research I found general patterns in the aesthetic labour required of workers and their aesthetic dispositions outside the workplace. Apart from 'Legend' where the aesthetic required suits to be worn, the clothes and fashions adopted by staff outside work were generally the same as what they wore at work.

'Legend' was an interesting contrast to 'Mojo' and 'Croft' because the appearance demanded of workers was so completely different to the other two stores. As 'Legend' workers had to wear suits they drew a more clear distinction between their work appearance and their 'real' selves:

**Carl (sales asst, 'Legend'):** I'm still a smart guy but obviously I don't like wear suits if I'm just shopping or going out drinking...outside of work I'm more relaxed...combats, jeans, t-shirts and stuff...more me...

**Diane (sales asst, 'Legend'):** I'm less starchy-looking because the real me is on show rather than having to look like a worker in uniform...you don't wear a suit if you're just going to buy bread or milk...

As we can see, the aesthetic that 'Legend' requires of its workers is purely a work-based performance. Although workers like Carl and Diane can still be 'smart guys' or 'less starchy-looking' they draw a clear distinction between how they dress at work and their 'real' or 'more relaxed' fashion style outside of work. Similarly, Diane draws attention to the fact that her work attire is marked *specifically* for work – she does not wear a suit for simple everyday activities such as 'going to buy bread and milk'. However, the same was not true for 'Mojo' and 'Croft' workers because of the requirements to wear 'trendy' and fashionable clothes similar to those they would wear outside of work.

**Jade (sales asst, 'Croft'): I dress more or less the same as I do outside work so that's cool, some jobs wouldn't let you wear the things I like...[Jade describes her style as 'rock chick', 'goth' or 'emo']...I tone it down a bit just because, y'know, some stuff is extreme and inappropriate...but that's cool...**

**Neil (sales asst, 'Mojo'): I like my clothes anyway...I'll dress the same in and out of work, its not really uniform for me...what some people see as labels...its just regular clothes to me...**

In these comments Jade and Neil both underline the synchronicity between the uniform requirements of their respective retailers and their stylised identities. Even when Jade mentions that she will 'tone it down a bit' she accepts the trade-off because her stylised identity as 'rock chick', 'goth' or 'emo' could be



seen as inappropriate in certain workplaces. This kind of work allows her to dress according to her own stylised identity and dispositions. Similarly Neil underlines how fashion creates distinctions between groups because what some people class as 'labels' are to him 'just regular clothes'.

A common feature for many of the more image-conscious workers, was a pre-occupation with authenticity in terms of being stylish and fashionable. Many of them bought clothes from discount stores, but they also sought out 'authentic' items and looked at 'quality', 'care' or 'individuality' as important factors affecting purchase decisions. This further illustrates the labour involved in *doing* consumption and how taste groups things and people together.

Speaking to the workers of 'Mojo' a surprising phenomenon was evident – despite the store aesthetic and brand strategy, many of the workers would shop at 'vintage' or 'retro' clothes shops. Very often this was justified by the workers as a practical solution to their low income, but it was also seen as a means of expressing an authentic and individual style.

**Gavin (sales asst, 'Mojo'): I get loads of my clothes from vintage shops, the denim is just better quality, a better fit and more affordable...other cheap jeans are just hashed together and look nasty...**

**Jonelle (sales asst, 'Mojo'): proper retro stuff or period clothing is fab and you'd be surprised but I get stuff from Primark too, but**

**you've got to mix and match...I might wear like a top from Primark but I'll have accessories with it and wear my expensive Victoria Beckham jeans or my "G-Stars" or "Replays"[jeans]...if you're head-to-toe in labels it looks pretentious and like you've got no style of your own...**

**Greg (sales asst, 'Mojo'): I love salvage denim and them old seventies-style tan-leather jackets they're classic and dead original...I like stuff nobody else has or that you'll see someone else wearing next to you in a bar...**

Workers saw this kind of clothing as more individual, unique and therefore 'trendy'. They even coupled items they had bought from vintage shops with clothing from 'Mojo' and combined the two at work. Original "Levi's", 'salvaged denim' or limited edition 'Victoria Beckham' jeans were combined with original 'Rolling Stones' t-shirts or the latest "G-Star" or "Replay" tops. This was accepted quite readily as long as the worker looked good and was in line with the store aesthetic. For 'Mojo' workers, this marked them out as 'trendy' and fashionable yet individual and authentic, thus increasing their credibility as salespeople.

However, this kind of relation to fashion requires 'work' and knowledge – it is important to see that so-called 'vintage' or 'retro' clothing stores are markedly different from charity shops, and carry their own cultural and symbolic value. Knowing where and when to shop is essential in finding the 'right' items as

supply is limited. An example would be the case of white plimsolls – inexpensive shoes (retailing between £4.50-£7) that have been ‘trendy’ for the past 5 years. These shoes regularly sell on ‘Ebay’ (often having been worn) for more than people have paid for them brand new, due to limited supply. This was negotiated by the staff I spoke to by their knowledge and contacts. Their social networks acted as an information network, and they gradually built up contacts across a range of shops in the local area and knew exactly when deliveries would arrive. This is representative of a local cultural economy based on knowledge and status exchange. Investment in this economy ultimately becomes a commodity and resource as workers keep up with the latest trends and mark themselves out as authentically stylish and fashionable. This is also something that can be fun or that workers enjoy doing:

**Gemma (sales asst ‘Mojo’):** I just like looking good, so for me really *having* to look good as part of your job isn’t really a big deal, I do it anyway, and if you worked in an office you’d still have to do the same, at least this way I get to wear what I want to work instead of like, dead plain shirts...(emphasis hers)

**Jade (sales asst, ‘Croft’):** I suppose I do spend a lot of time putting makeup on and doing my hair but I enjoy looking the way I do and if you enjoy it then its not really a lot of effort...

**Gavin (sales asst, ‘Mojo’):** I do like making an effort and looking good yeah, but I get loads of stick over my hair, Dawn always says

**it looks a mess and that I need to get it cut, but I don't want to, I like it long...so that means I've got to style it more and wash it more which is a bit shit...but then I might not be able to get away with my hair like this in another job...**

These comments all indicate that the workers enjoy spending time, effort and money on their appearance and that their aesthetic labour enables them to dress in line with their style preferences. Although Gavin finds having to maintain a particular hair care routine a bit of a chore, like Jade, he accepts that this kind of work offers him the possibility of keeping his hair in line with his image and therefore helps to sustain his aesthetic disposition in line with his self.

This section has highlighted the preoccupation with being stylish and trendy as illustrative of how work and non-work filter into each other. However this does not only apply to clothing. Being stylish and trendy also involve other aspects of workers' lifestyles and these similarly permeate the spheres of work and non-work.

### **Music and drinking culture**

As we have seen retail 'work' does not exist in a vacuum – as a highly diverse sector, retail segments inter-connect with other sectors. Those sectors heavily involved with fashion can be varied but essentially I found other entertainment industries to be the most influential. The core ones included music and drinking culture. Knowing about the latest DJs, trendiest bands/groups, and knowing all

the local trendy bars and clubs, also become exchangeable commodities in the local cultural economy. This becomes tied in with success as a salesperson. Most of the more successful sales staff (in 'Croft' and 'Mojo') also spent a considerable amount of time and resources going out. This was also recognised by local clubs and bars who in addition to using the consumption spaces of 'Croft' and 'Mojo' for advertising (through flyers and posters) were also keen to attract 'Mojo' and 'Croft' workers as regular clientele.

Promotional workers would routinely visit 'Croft' and 'Mojo' along with other shops to distribute posters and flyers. Notably, only 'trendy' shops or those that fitted the aesthetic of the bars and clubs were selected for these promotional activities. In exchange for the free advertising, the promotional workers would also distribute V.I.P. retail passes or allocate 'Guest-list' spaces to the retail workers. This was also a shrewd attempt to attract the workers of 'Mojo' and 'Croft' as regular customers. The following excerpts are taken from letters handed to the stores by promotional workers and are typical of these as a whole:

*We are looking to forge strong links with yourselves that would benefit you, your staff and your business. **'Allure' Nightclub Retail Staff Privilege Passes** will be distributed to you on a monthly basis, accompanied by a newsletter and display signage, offering your staff **exclusive entry and drink discounts.***

*We have undergone some changes in the last few weeks to maximise all 4 floors of the grade 1 listed building to your full enjoyment...We have Funky, sexy vocal dance with **DAN STAFFORD** ('Deep', 'Fusion') and **RICHIE P** ('Quake', 'Epoch') on the 3<sup>rd</sup> floor, and **JAY ROCKWELL** ('Clinch', 'Fusion', 'Deep') & **DJ UDO** ('Casanova', 'Vibe-Up', 'Deep') playing sexy up front RnB and Hip Hop on the 2<sup>nd</sup> floor.*

*As an incentive we are offering your team '**Allure**' V.I.P. CARDS valid for 1-years **FREE** admission to the holder and **2 of their guests** any night plus access to our exclusive **VIP lounge on the top floor...**'*  
(Promotional letter from the manager of 'Allure')

Similarly, from another bar:

***This Friday – 'Choonz'** will be playing host to none other than **sexy ex-Boyzone member Shane Lynch!** He will be here **meeting and greeting** those of you who are coming down as well as **signing autographs** and **posing for pics!***

*Remember, we have some **new networking passes** for you, offering **FREE ADMISSION every Saturday** before 11.30pm and **fast track entry until 1am!** **FREE ENTRY every Friday** before midnight and again **fast track entry until 1am!** The old networking passes are no longer valid so please use the new ones provided in this pack...(promotional pack from 'Choonz')*

Such attempts to 'forge links' with particular retailers and their workers were common. Again this highlighted the local cultural value attached to particular shops as only certain retailers were selected for such promotional offers. Notably, 'Mojo' received the most attention from bars and clubs because it was a local independent retailer, but also because of the designer labels associated with the store ('Mojo's competitors – 'FYC', 'Elect' etc. were courted with similar enthusiasm). However, the bars and clubs were also located within competing fields of cultural value. Consequently they were subject to the tastes and dispositions of workers as certain clubs were seen as 'trendy' compared to others and distinctions were made by management and workers as to which clubs and bars were appropriate to be advertised or to frequent.

**Rachel (sales asst, 'Mojo'): certain bars we'll put the posters up and leave flyers on the cash desk but others are too charvery or naff...I tend to drink in the nice swanky bars like 'Allure'... 'Choonz' and them are just full of charvers...I would not be seen dead in them...**

In this case, 'Allure', with its numerous floors, VIP lounge and variety of 'trendy' music was seen as appropriate. In comparison, 'Choonz' was viewed with more disdain as 'charvery' or 'naff' and therefore unsuitable. This is exemplified by the entertainment provided. 'Allure' emphasises its many floors set within a luxurious 'grade 1 listed building' and wide variety of DJs. In comparison 'Choonz' was highlighting the promotional appearance of 'ex-Boyzone member – Shane Lynch' as a main attraction which subsequently meant workers like Rachel would 'not be seen dead' at such 'naff' bars.

The workers studied here used such 'networking' or 'privilege' passes to experience all of the local bars and clubs and so had a depth of knowledge about where was good and 'swanky' or indeed 'charvery'. This gave them an edge when trying to establish rapport with customers and close a sale as it enabled them to have a large amount of input when customers asked advice on what to wear to various places when they went out drinking, and in recommending which places to go to.

At a personal level, the workers at 'Mojo' and 'Croft' also found their lifestyles important in their construction of their aesthetic identities. Music, clubbing and fashion also interconnect through cultural styles of music such as 'dirty electro', 'Hed Kandi', 'krunk' or 'funky house'. Bars and clubs have special nights dedicated solely to particular types of music and as new styles of music become fashionable, so too do particular bars and styles of dress. Being trendy can thus become more than about what you wear:

**Erin (sales asst, 'Mojo'): I'm out every week until like 5am...I just love being out in all the mint trendy bars listening to the funky music...I'm really into trends, I have to have the latest in everything...I could never just go anywhere. I've got to go to the right places where all the best music is played and all the beautiful people go...**



**Arran (sales asst, 'Mojo'): I like going to 'Manor', 'Allure' and 'Perception', everyone makes an effort, it's not full of meatheads, the music is class, everyone looks cool and stylish, the whole place is nice...it's almost like you can't just go out clubbing anymore, you've got to go to the right clubs and be with the right people...**

**Jade (sales asst, 'Croft'): it all gets too much, like you have to go to certain bars, in a certain order and sit, stand and dance with all the beautiful people, it's too pretentious for me...I'm a rock chick...people might call me an 'emo' but I don't care at least I'm not pretentious...all these trendy people started coming to the places I normally go to and wearing like ripped t-shirts and stuff because rock music became dead trendy, they've all started drinking elsewhere now because 'electro' is the new 'in-thing'...**

These comments highlight how 'being trendy' becomes part of an overall lifestyle and is exhibited not only through the fashion styles of workers, but also in their knowledge about the local bar and club scene. The lifestyles of these workers point towards splitting the 'beautiful people' from the 'others'. If we take Erin and Arran's characterisation to be true, being one of the 'beautiful people' involves the right aesthetic capital in terms of looks, but also in disposition towards music and bars. The 'beautiful people' do not just go anywhere rather they inhabit particular trendy clubs and bars as long as they remain fashionable. As Jade indicates, this encouraged a shift in bar/club patronage when rock

music became more 'trendy' which subsequently diminished when 'electro' became the new 'in-thing'.

These lifestyles become marketable commodities as workers sell themselves as 'trendy', 'beautiful' or 'rock' people. This is an exchangeable resource when it comes to employment, but also in terms of the aesthetic labour they sell to customers. In this way, workers can become local cultural 'cognoscenti' as they sell their knowledge about where is 'trendy' or what to wear for particular bars/clubs to customers.

**Siobhan (sales asst, 'Mojo'): some guys will come in and say we're going out to this new bar and I need something to wear...you can get them to get a whole new outfit because they don't know and trust what you say...if I know what it's like then I can be like you'll need a shirt or you should wear some cool jeans and a t-shirt...**

**Greg (sales asst, 'Mojo'): a lot of lads come here for weekends away or stag do's and they haven't got a clue where to go or what to wear so they'll ask you and you'll kit them out...**

This demonstrates that the aesthetic labour of workers not only involves selling their gender, sexuality, looks and personal fashion sense, but also their lifestyles. This drinking culture was also the main way that workers formed intimate relationships. Many of these were developed as a result of meeting people through serving them at work.

## **Sexual relationships**

When work involves meeting a lot of people and selling yourself through sexual servicing (Adkins, 1995) as well as saleable goods in such a (predominantly hetero)sexually charged environment inevitably 'liaisons' between staff and customers will occur. The selling of gender and sexuality was explored in previous chapters however I want to draw attention to this now in light of the blurring between work and non-work. This will take the form of exploring dating or sexual relationships with customers outside the workplace and the workplace itself as a source of contact or access point.

As noted earlier, men and women are positioned differently according to sexuality and this governs not only movement through the social (gendered and intimate) space of the shopfloor and backstage areas such as fitting rooms, but also contact and knowledge of each others' bodies. In this context, male sexuality is more explicitly contained (through the exclusion of male workers on ladieswear) and so expression of heterosexual desire becomes more problematic or unviable for men<sup>5</sup>. In contrast, I observed many of the female sales assistants that worked in menswear departments/sections routinely 'checking out' the male shoppers. In addition they were extremely open about their sexual appetite. They would also be able to use work as an effective way of meeting prospective sexual partners or boyfriends.

**Gemma (sales asst, 'Mojo'): I love checking out all the hotties and having a bit crack with 'em, it's one of the perks of the job...I've met**

**loads of blokes through doing this [job]...getting numbers is fairly normal...**

**Siobhan (sales asst, 'Mojo'): I always get numbers...I got five in one day last week...I think it's the Irish accent...and I suppose I am all over the ones that I quite fancy...but its just a dead sexy job...putting men in jeans and looking at their bums (laughs)...I just come straight out and say "your bum looks really sexy in them there jeans"...**

The female workers cited here obviously enjoy this aspect of the job. Although we can clearly see that there is an objectification of the female staff in this environment, they do not necessarily experience this in a negative way. Similarly, although many would argue that men are not objectified or that if they are, it is a different form of objectification, it cannot be denied that both Gemma and Siobhan objectify their male customers and take great pleasure in doing so. It is important to note also that the objectification of male customers is not always covert – particularly in Siobhan's case she outlines that she comes 'straight out' with sexual comments to men she finds attractive. Similarly, the decision about whether relationships will develop into intimate ones is also governed by the worker and her attraction to the customer in question:

**Gemma (sales asst, 'Mojo'): it's ideal for meeting people cos you can always slip in a comment about their girlfriend to find out if they have one and go from there...**

**Siobhan (sales asst, 'Mojo'): it's great cos you get to see their bodies before you choose whether to call them...**

**Kelly (sales asst, 'Croft'): if I really fancy someone I'll hint and ask where they're going this weekend and say "oh I might see you there" or "I might have to give you a dance" or something...then I'll keep an eye open when I'm out and if things go well I'll pull him...**

These comments illustrate that female workers are able to capitalise upon the way they are sexually objectified at work and engage in sexual encounters with male customers that they 'fancy'. These liaisons can be enjoyable for the workers as they are able to take advantage of their occupation which necessarily involves them interacting with large numbers of men. This allows them to select attractive men for dates or sexual encounters. However, the sexual service that female workers provide continues outside of the workplace with many male customers without ever becoming anything other than a work-based relationship. In this way their labour transcends the workplace and this was also apparent for the homosocial servicing that their male colleagues performed.

### **Open all hours – labour transcending the workplace environment.**

The argument so far has focused on exploring the blurred boundaries between work and non-work. Clearly there is huge scope for the permeation of activities across boundaries of public/private, work/leisure etc. However, I will now draw

attention to the fact that workers actually continue sexual servicing of customers outside of the workplace. This mainly occurred when out drinking, but was also a feature of everyday life for workers when around the shopping centre or local area. As previously discussed, sexual servicing was a more prominent aspect of the labour of 'Croft' and 'Mojo' workers and consequently it was these workers who continued this labour in their free time<sup>6</sup>. This filtering of work into the social lives of employees also retained gendered features as male workers continued performing homosocial servicing and their female colleagues continued with their heteronormative sexual servicing.<sup>7</sup>

### ***'Mate relations'***

The homosocial servicing of male customers has already been outlined in a previous chapter but this is not restricted to the work environment. Instead this continues outside of the workplace and was most prominent when workers were out drinking.

**Sean (sales asst, 'Croft'): I get recognised quite a bit...people see you in the shop and you can spend a while with them so when they see you they come over and have a bit of a laugh and that...**

**Neil (sales asst, 'Mojo'): loads of blokes think you're one of their mates all of a sudden...I don't think they're stupid...they know that's what we do...but if you've had a good bit crack with someone then they'll come and talk to you...even though you don't even know each other's names...**

**Craig (sales asst, 'Croft'): I was surprised at first at how many guys actually see you and recognise you...but they don't just smile...they like come over and ask where you're going and sometimes him and his mates will try and tag along with you and your mates...**

These situations were common for the male workers but they were not merely fleeting and innocuous encounters. Instead, these encounters with customers lead to the continuation of their homosocial servicing outside of the workplace.

**Phil (sales asst, 'Mojo'): you've got to stand and talk with them when they see you...even when you can't be arsed...or else you'd look rude and they'd think "I'm not buying stuff off him again"...**

**Greg (Sales asst, 'Mojo'): I do get sick of it like, blokes coming up to you thinking you're their best mate cos you've served them a couple of weeks ago or something, but you have to go along with it, besides, if you can keep it up it's the easiest way to get regulars.**

Clearly these workers feel they have to continue with their labour performances when customers approach them outside of work. This is more than simply the 'management of feeling' in the sense used by Hochschild, and is more focused on implications for work. Both Greg and Phil feel they have no option but to continue their homosocial servicing. This compulsion is not verbalised in terms of maintaining civility but instead to maintain or increase their productivity as

workers. This is even more marked when we consider that they continue labouring when they 'can't be arsed' or despite getting 'sick of it'. Generally workers felt they could negotiate this invasion of work into their personal lives by spending some time with customers they encountered while out drinking. This generally took the form of 'having a bit crack' as they did on the shopfloor, however events could also take a more serious turn.

**Arran (sales asst, 'Mojo'): it keeps the peace, sometimes they can think you're a bit full of yourself if you're not the same outside of work...they think you're not talking to them on purpose 'cos you're full of yourself...one guy wanted a proper fight outside a bar once 'cos he said I'd blanked him, but I just hadn't clocked him...**

**Sean (sales asst, 'Croft'): the drunken ones are a worry, like you've got to go along with them and smile and laugh at their jokes...otherwise that's how fights start...**

Such occurrences were not uncommon among the workers as some customers, fuelled with alcohol, could take offence if they felt ignored or become aggressive if they thought workers were 'full of themselves'. These situations are a direct result of encounters within an alcohol-centred environment as workers only ever cited them as happening in bars and clubs. Continuing with labour outside of work in a bar or club must be negotiated carefully as failure to 'clock', smile and laugh with customers can lead to fights. These risks can be concerns for many people on a night out, but it becomes more pronounced for these workers when



they are regularly recognised by members of the public and feel compelled to continue their labour performances.

***'Flirting and diverting'***

Male workers are not alone in their continuation of their labour performances outside of work. Female workers at 'Croft' and 'Mojo' also found themselves locked into sexually servicing their male customers. This was interesting because not only did female workers continue sexual service initiated in the service encounter, but they also found that men they flirted with in bars and clubs would then become customers and even 'regulars' if they could keep their interest.

**Jonelle (sales asst, 'Mojo'): sometimes guys that are interested will ask about you, where you work and that...if I like him or think he's ok I'll tell him...before you know it he'll start coming and buying his jeans from me...**

In a similar way to their male colleagues, the female workers of 'Mojo' and 'Croft' regularly encountered customers when out drinking. In addition they also felt compelled to continue with their labour performances to avoid problems at work and maintain their productivity.

**Dominique (sales asst, 'Croft'): if you don't humour them they might be arsey with you next time they come in the store or just shop somewhere else...**

**Gemma (sales asst, 'Mojo'): you can't just cut them dead if a customer comes up to you when you're out drinking, people would think I was a right stuck up bitch...they'd never come back [to 'Mojo']...**

These comments echo those of their male counterparts but one aspect of their continued labour is fundamentally different. As female workers sell their sexual availability through heteronormative sexual service, it is their sexual availability they must continue to sell when encountering customers out drinking. Female workers found this both pleasurable and stressful:

**Rachel (sales asst, 'Mojo'): if you've been flirting with a guy in the shop then he's gonna think his luck is in when he sees you out all dressed up with a drink in your hand...I normally don't mind it, especially if he's fit but sometimes if it's a knobhead or if he's minging its hard...**

**Kelly (sales asst, 'Croft'): I like having the attention, my girlfriends get a bit jealous I think, they wish they had gorgeous blokes coming up to them like I do...its just because of work...they reckon they've got a connection and they'll try to chat you up**

**Siobhan (sales asst, 'Mojo'): oh god I love guys...when they wave at you and buy you drinks you feel all beautiful and glamorous which**

**is silly...it's just because you've spent some time with them...but you've got to be careful...be nice and sexy but not too much that they'll go too far...**

These workers find the attention they receive from male customers intensely pleasurable and even enough to make them feel 'beautiful and glamorous'. However, we can also see the caution that these women exercise and the stress that continuing to humour the sexual fantasies of men can cause. Continuing with labour in this way can also be risky for female workers. Siobhan states that she will 'be nice and sexy but not too much that they'll go too far...' Other workers voiced similar concerns:

**Jonelle (sales asst, 'Mojo'): I fancy a lot of the men that come in to the shop but when you see them in a bar you've got to be careful...they could just be really good-looking rapists who think you're up for it...**

**Gemma (sales asst, 'Mojo'): I think because we're all pretty and look after our appearance we are desirable...especially considering a lot of the girls will flirt with guys to get sales...guys think you're easy...you watch what you're doing because drunken men can be very intimidating...try and cop a feel or maybe worse...**

This highlights the risks that women face when they work in a sexualised environment where they sell their sexualities as part of the product. The fact

they sell their sexual availability makes them feel cautious when around 'drunken men' because they feel the sexualised nature of their work can leave them open to sexual harassment. Consequently, female workers negotiate encounters with customers outside of work skilfully and with caution. The impact that such continued labour has upon workers is that they can often feel pressurised and stressed as they continue their labour performances in their own free time. It is to this area that I will now turn in order to explore the negative and positive impacts that the blurred boundaries of work/leisure and the filtering of sexual servicing has upon the workers I researched.

### **The 'hidden injuries' of service work**

Following Hochschild's analysis of service work and emotional labour we could draw the conclusion that all of this 'intrusion' into and 'appropriation' of interests and private lives of workers leads to a greater sense of alienation (Hochschild, 1983; Sturdy and Fineman, 2001) or perhaps even points to the 'hidden injuries' (Sennett and Cobb, 1977) of service work.<sup>8</sup> Although Hochschild may have found among her respondents that they felt alienated from their 'feelingful self', this was not necessarily the case with all of the workers in my research.

The way workers look, their time and investment in their appearance, keeping up with trends, their interests and activities outside the workplace can be appropriated by the organisation for which they work. However, whether staff experience this positively or negatively is a complicated question. Lifestyles and looks can be exchangeable commodities, but as we have seen, workers take pride in their aesthetic labour and can enjoy being one of the 'beautiful people'

or belonging to other stylised groups. Similarly, they become important figures for bars and clubs as they court their patronage using special offers and 'privilege passes'. Workers take advantage of these as a perk of the job and thus receive benefits that can feed into their identities and enhance their status as 'beautiful people' or 'trendy'.

However, there are a number ways in which we can see 'hidden injuries' of service work. In pro-active selling environments, workers found that their sexual servicing becomes mobile, moving across social arenas and presenting itself most readily when workers were out drinking in their leisure time. This intrusion into their private lives can be very taxing. Other research has found that service workers employed in high-contact occupations routinely seek solitude after work (Abiala, 2000). In this case, workers also sought to be alone, found themselves changing taste in music and thus perhaps the erosion of their identity:

**Gemma (sales asst, 'Mojo'): I used to love 'funky house' music but I'm getting sick of it now, we play it all day in the shop...**

**Craig (sales asst, 'Croft'): it ends up that when you go out you want to listen to something a bit different, you get sick of the same tunes...I drink in different bars to get away from it...**

**Jade (sales asst, 'Croft'): I hate all that dance music and house music but it kind of brainwashes you when its all you listen to at work...I'll start singing along to a track and my goth mates are like**

***'you like this song!'*...Its not that I like it but it just stays in your head until you want to explode...(emphasis hers)**

These comments highlight the 'brainwashing' that occurs as a result of exposure to the same music every day. In this way, the aesthetic of the stores have a direct impact on the dispositions of workers and their stylised identities. Gemma finds herself becoming sick of music she previously liked whereas Craig finds himself going to different bars to escape the music. In comparison, Jade finds that the aesthetic 'brainwashes' her which leads to a jarring between her stylised identity (as a 'rock chick') which is echoed by her 'goth mates' and ultimately makes her 'want to explode'. These examples illustrate that the workplace aesthetic can pose risks for the stylised identities and dispositions of workers.

In a similar vein, the hours involved in retail work can also inflict 'hidden injuries' upon the social lives of employees. At peak times of the year (i.e. during Christmas) and over a weekend this can feel especially acute taking a heavy toll on the social lives of staff:

**Gavin (sales asst, 'Mojo'): it feels like I've had no Christmas, all the late nights and working all the time when everyone else is off enjoying themselves...it's just really crap it makes you hate Christmas.**

**Rachel (sales asst, 'Mojo'): well I ended up ill, the hours and the stress and that, and then having to work 6 day weeks, I just ended up run-down and depressed with the whole thing, I don't wanna be in retail this time next year...**

**Anthony (sales asst, 'Legend'): working weekends is pretty bad...all of your mates go out and you're working, even if I manage to get out and meet them later on I feel like I've missed most the night and everyone's pissed by the time you get there so most of the time its just not worth it...**

These comments indicate that workers feel that their social lives suffer as a result of the hours involved in retail work. However, resentment and frustration are not the only 'hidden injuries' presented here. If we look at Rachel's statement, having to work six days a week during extremely busy and stressful periods had a negative impact upon her physical and mental well-being which culminated in her feeling 'run-down and depressed'. This had been felt so keenly that Rachel was adamant at the time of interview that she would not work another Christmas in retail. One of the major reasons the workers found the hours difficult was that they often clash with the regular working week. The 'weekend' and public holidays have different meanings for retail workers. Often the busiest and most stressful times for retail workers, resentment and frustration are compounded because so many others are actually off work and having a good time or enjoying their leisure time.

## **Concluding remarks**

It was essential to outline how we think about work life and 'leisure' or 'non-work' in order to illustrate how there is no clear-cut division between the workplace and 'private lives' of retail workers. Having an interest in fashion and trends becomes a commodity and resource within the arena of fashion retail. Authors have suggested that for contemporary workers the boundaries between work and leisure have become increasingly blurred (De Certeau, 1984; Glucksmann, 2005; Bottero, 2005; Pettinger, 2005b). While I would agree that the retail workers I studied definitely find it difficult to separate their interests or leisure pursuits from their work lives, retail is a diverse sector. Whereas my research participants may find fashion, appearance and lifestyle a key part of their life inside and outside of work one can imagine that the same 'blurring' is less likely to be a feature of the labour for staff in 'Pricebeaters'. Accordingly we need to be careful about identifying types of work and 'workplaces' within highly diverse markets and their potential effects on the lives of workers engaged in them.

Looking towards how workers are located within wider social structures is also crucial in exploring the filtering of work and non-work into each other. The social distance approach is a useful tool in exploring these issues as it allows for individuals to be located within markets of exchange (based on status and capital) and takes into account people's life course and trajectory. Situated within local markets of aesthetic exchange, working in fashion, and for particular retailers, can give rise to status and cultural/symbolic capital dependent upon wider social circumstances such as life stage or life course trajectory.



Consequently this approach helps to understand how particular workers find fashion retail enjoyable or can derive status and attach cultural value to work that others may find boring, demeaning and poorly paid.

Attention has focused on the sociability of employees and how this helps to produce the brand strategy and retail space of organizations and improve the individual productivity of workers through forming relationships with customers. Workers express an affinity with their organisations or the kind of work they perform. One of the ways they do so is through their fashion sense. Being able to 'be yourself' was an important element of the work for those at 'Croft' and 'Mojo'. This was expressed through their sociability, but also through stylised identities and attachment to cultural groupings such as 'beautiful' or 'rock' people. These identities also become resources for the workers as they represent local cultural 'cognoscenti', providing advice to and dressing the local populace. The labour involved in 'non-work' activities of workers enhances their credibility and authenticity as 'trendy' or fashionable. Similarly, female workers are able to take advantage of their interaction with male customers through dating and sexual relations. The individual lifestyles of workers thus further illustrate the 'fuzzy boundaries' between work and non work.

However, workers also feel compelled to continue with their labour performances when they encounter customers while out drinking. This retains the gendered and sexualised elements that distinguish male and female aesthetic labour mentioned in previous chapters. Such encounters can be enjoyable for workers but they can also be stressful and cause anxiety. The

threat of physical and sexual violence was a real issue for these workers as they felt their occupation placed them at higher risk. Such perceptions and invasions into the personal lives of workers represent the 'hidden injuries' of service work. The extent of these injuries was varied, as workers found their stylised identities both enabled and challenged. In addition, the shift patterns involved in retail work led to workers feeling resentful, frustrated and stressed at having to work when others are out enjoying themselves. Similarly, the long hours can take their toll on the health and wellbeing of individual workers as they become 'run-down' and 'depressed' by the restrictions and pressure that their shift patterns place upon their social lives. We need to further investigate the extent of this 'crossover' between work and non-work and the extent of these 'hidden injuries' that are inflicted upon workers as well as the benefits and positive experiences they enjoy.

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<sup>1</sup> Bottero classifies social distance approaches as recognising that 'differential patterns of association and lifestyle *constitute* the structure of stratification, which is conceived...as a social space of relationships' (2005: 60 emphasis original). This stands in contrast to class theories that pose stratification as an *influence* upon practices and lifestyles.

<sup>2</sup> Other reasons included the preference for younger workers because they were seen as more likely to be subordinate or a better long-term investment. The low wages, long hours, often monotonous and boring shifts inherent in retail work are seen as discouraging older workers from applying for such work. Younger people are therefore seen as more likely to stay in these jobs for a longer time or at least within a certain time-frame that is predictable or explicit (i.e. leaving in April/September to study for exams or go to university/college). Also young people in higher/further education form one of (if not *the*) most prominent groups that apply for retail work in the first place. Although other groups tend to be concentrated in retail as well, managers claim that recent school/college/university-leavers and existing students

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form the main basis of their workforces. This group also provides managers with a large 'resource-pool' from which to draw permanent and disposable labour.

<sup>3</sup> Of course, Pettinger is also astute enough to point out that workplace sociability can function to the detriment of organization goals – in short, workers chatting to each other can seriously effect service provision, as customers can be ignored or 'missed'. Similarly, this sociability can function to exclude not only customers but also other workers, such as temporary staff. At a personal level, 'cliques' form leading sociability to also be the source of conflict, gossip, backbiting and bitchiness (Pettinger, 2005b).

<sup>4</sup> A popular club night and style of music.

<sup>5</sup> Although homosexual workers can express sexual desire on occasion and heterosexual male workers will play on their sexuality when serving older/younger female customers.

<sup>6</sup> As the main role of workers in 'Legend' was to enable 'self service' they were seldom (if ever) recognised in public by customers and therefore unlikely to continue labour performances outside of work. However, it was evident that the more pro-active the sales strategy of the retailer, the greater the likelihood staff would be recognised and *have* to continue their labour performances. In addition, aesthetic labour and sexual service were much more prominent aspects of the overall labour of these workers.

<sup>7</sup> Homosexual servicing did occur but was rare as the local area had an established 'gay scene'. Even though some of these bars were mixed, or as 'trendy' bars emerged next to the 'gay scene' the scope for male workers to continue sexually servicing gay men was limited. Similarly the heterosexual servicing of female customers by male workers outside the workplace was an unusual occurrence as most female shoppers already had partners.

<sup>8</sup> I'd like to thank Chris Warhurst who introduced me to this notion as part of a school seminar at the University of Strathclyde.

## **Chapter 7: Conclusion**

Throughout the life of this project there has been a steady increase in research focusing on aesthetic labour, service work and even men in non-traditional occupations. Prior to this, with a few exceptions, there had been relatively little examination of the activities and social milieu of male service workers. More generally, the retail sector remains under-researched as a significant area of sociological concern. This research has sought to fill this empirical void by contributing to an emerging body of work examining retail, gender and service work.

My focus has always been the investigation of gendered aesthetics among retail workers and their experiences. Initially I had intended to focus on male workers within this context, using the experiences of their female colleagues as a minor comparative analytical tool. The fact that female workers became an increasingly prominent part of the research has not detracted from the aim of the project. Instead, this extension has allowed me to incorporate a more in-depth comparative analysis of male and female front-line service workers in the fashion retail sector.

The following sections pull together the arguments made in the previous chapters before moving on to discuss possible avenues for further exploration that have become more prominent as a result of this research.

### ***Aesthetics, gender, sexuality and fashion retail***

This chapter focused on the gendered aesthetic labour of male retail workers in a region that has experienced rapid social change. We have seen how existing research proposes that female-dominated occupations can be potentially risky for individual men and masculinities. These risks include the low-status and low wages associated with traditionally 'female' jobs and challenges to masculinity and heterosexuality associated with the fashion industry. However, we have also seen the resourcefulness of men and masculinities. After the decline of traditionally 'male' jobs, we have seen how men are able to adapt to work defined as 'feminine'.

One of the main research questions in this study considered the gendered aesthetics of retail work. A number of issues are perhaps worth reiterating here. First, that gender remains a key factor in the employment prospects of male and female workers. Male and female workers were chosen on the basis of whether the sales team 'needed' more men or women. This was heavily influenced by management ideas over how to achieve and maintain a 'well-balanced' and productive workforce.

Second, that the aesthetic capital of applicants was a major influence upon the hiring preferences of management as they sought workers that would embody the image of the store in question. These two factors however, are not independent of each other. Workers had to represent themselves as appropriately masculine or feminine. Male and female workers had to display

traditionally masculine and feminine performances or risk being seen as 'too quiet', 'unfriendly' or 'not fitting in'. For male workers this involved looking good, being 'one of the lads', displaying particular (stylistic, aged and classed) masculinities and interests (such as sport, drinking, clubbing etc). Similarly, female workers had to look good, be 'up for it' and display certain (stylistic, aged and classed) femininities and interests (such as personal grooming, drinking and clubbing). In this way, masculinity and femininity are produced, enacted and maintained through the performance of aesthetic labour. Gendered aesthetic capital is thus crucial for job acquisition and retention.

Third, men and women sell their masculinities and femininities as a commodity to management but also to consumers. In particular, male retail workers help to create the menswear departments as masculine consumption spaces and contribute to the image of the store through their aesthetic labour. Masculine identity becomes part of the 'product' being sold. This directly contradicts research that suggests only women's identities can be appropriated in such a way (Adkins, 1995; Adkins and Lury, 1999). The presence of men in the workplace setting is seen as crucial by management. In their eyes, men are needed not only to provide 'balance' to the workforce, but also to create their brand as simultaneously fashionable and masculine. Men actively exchange their aesthetic labour on this basis and at the same time also exchange their masculinity. This is then further 'packaged' and 'sold' to other men through their gendered aesthetic labour performances.

This is not to say that men and women are gendered or sexualised in the same way, or perform the same gendered aesthetic labour, but that *both* male and

female service workers perform and sell their gender and sexualities as part of a commodity exchange.

Fourth, we need to locate the concept of aesthetic labour within the wider sexual economy which governs what is 'attractive'. This can be achieved through incorporating and broadening Adkins' notion of sexual service. I have developed a typology of 'sexual servicing' in order to give greater conceptual coverage of the work performed by men and women in retail service work. This included 'Heteronormative'; 'Homosocial'; and 'Homosexual'. Looking at different forms of sexual service enables further elaboration of the 'product' being sold as part of the aesthetic labour of employees. This also helps to explain why female workers seem 'locked' into exchanging their sexuality for male customers but cannot do so with stylised 'butch lesbians'. It also helps to account for the fact certain gay men are 'acceptable others' within the setting as long as they continue to fall within the realms of 'attractive' and fashionable men.

In this way men were required to appeal to the heterosexual and homosexual male consumer, to have a 'flexible' or 'mobile' relation to sexuality in a way that their female colleagues were not. However, despite being 'mobile' or 'flexible', these performances are also compulsory. Men *must* be able to relate to male customers. This requirement predominantly involves being able to carry out homosocial servicing, through shared stylised masculinities, but also involved homosexual servicing. Although homosexualities can be incorporated into homosocial servicing, being able to embody and perform heterosexual

masculinity is an implicit requirement. The majority of the workers in this study identified as heterosexual and of the openly gay workers, Ed successfully 'blended' through his appearance as a 'typical bloke' and Leo was only camp or flamboyant when he could 'get away with it'. Therefore, the male workers, in general, shared a common 'heterosexual' stylised masculinity with their customers and were involved in the co-constitution of their own and their customer's heterosexual masculine selves.

When we look at the labour of male employees in this way we can see how their sexual selves are commodified and appropriated. Although this is similar to the compulsory (hetero)sexualisation of their female colleagues, the fundamental difference appears to be the extent to which workers engage in different forms of sexual service. Working on a menswear department, female workers appear to be trapped in terms of selling their sexualities and sexual availability. Their homosocial forms of sexual service are rooted in their (assumed) shared heterosexuality with female customers and their usual focus was on sexually servicing male customers. This highlights their *immobility* in terms of their sexualities at work. Heteronormative servicing is a fundamental aspect of female sales assistants' work. However, workers are not oblivious to the fact they offer their identities and sexualities as part of the product. In fact, they actively use these as resources to make sales.

Fifth, sexual harassment exists for both male and female employees. This is a direct consequence of wider power structures, but also because of the power relations between worker and customer in a sexualised environment. Men may



struggle to negotiate sexual harassment as successfully as their female colleagues and cannot negotiate it as effectively as other potential challenges to their heterosexual masculinities arising from their occupation and environment in which they work. In line with previous research, female workers endure sexual harassment as 'part of the job'. This is an interesting contrast to the active and, at times, aggressive use of their sexualities when serving customers. This highlights the precarious position that female workers, in particular, occupy in relation to the exploitation of their sexualities. Sexual harassment however, was not the major challenge for these workers. Instead they found that safeguarding their reputations was more important.

Both male and female workers were concerned with how others perceived them in terms of their sexualities. For heterosexual male workers this was rooted in fears of being labelled 'homosexual' but for female workers was based in terms of avoiding the label of 'slag'. The heterosexual male workers in this study felt that they have to carefully monitor their aesthetic labour so as not to appear 'too camp' and risk being labelled as homosexual. This risk arose in part because of their particular stylised masculinities, but also because of their position in the feminised environment of fashion retail. In comparison, female workers held concerns over being labelled promiscuous or 'man-stealers'. All of the above issues related more to the pro-active sales environments of 'Mojo' and 'Croft'. This can be seen as a direct result of the way sales assistants in these shops have to sell themselves as part of the product.

Sixth, the combination of active selling in a sexualised environment compounded the ways in which work and leisure filter into each other. This can be experienced as both negative and positive by front-line service workers as the sexual servicing of customers moves beyond the workplace and into the realms of personal relationships outside of work. Both male and female workers at 'Mojo' and 'Croft' continued with their labour performances outside of the workplace when they encountered customers on the local drinking scene. For male workers this typically involved the continuation of 'mate relations' with their male customers while for their female colleagues, this involved continuing with the selling of their sexuality. The motivations for doing so were based around personal gain for the employee, but also productivity for their respective employers. This point will be expanded in one of the latter sections below as I consider more generally how work and leisure filter into each other.

Finally, I asked 'what makes a successful retail sales assistant?' A substantial proportion of this success is a result of 'doing gender' effectively. As we have seen, individual workers must conform to cultural norms governing masculinities and femininities otherwise they risk losing their jobs. How effective individual workers are at performing masculinities and femininities influences the skills and techniques of persuasion they develop. As men and women relate to each other in different ways, so too must male and female sales assistants rely on gendered forms of interaction and selling.

This suggests that scope for misbehaviour and resistance in relation to gendered norms would be minimal. Although this is true resistance still exists.

Sometimes this challenges cultural norms (as well as health and safety regulations!). Female workers actively engage in boisterous and disruptive behaviour and male workers routinely bitch with other members of staff. These may not represent massive challenges to the gender order, but they do indicate that the workers themselves misbehave and do not necessarily totally conform to cultural norms governing gendered behaviour.

### ***Service, Surveillance and Resistance***

Discussion in chapter five outlined the complexity of the concept of 'customer service' and set out to interrogate precisely how workers interpreted and performed 'customer service'. The fragility of retail markets was starkly observed as consumer spending fell dramatically during the period of this research. Such factors can have serious consequences for organisations and lead to re-evaluations in terms of their approach to service in an increasingly competitive market.

The retailers are driven by achieving and surpassing sales targets, but are also concerned with their brand image. These two areas were key factors affecting how management controlled and monitored the performances of workers. The three main areas of surveillance included: tasks and service provision; appearance and attitude; and meeting targets. The last category relates to the pro-active sales environments of 'Mojo' and 'Croft', but the other two are apparent across stores. Workers in pro-active selling environments find themselves subject to the surveillance processes of organizations in which performance and productivity are measured through an individual's ability to

meet daily/monthly sales targets. This is compounded by delivering a service to 'demanding publics'. Emphasis on reaching and beating targets whilst simultaneously encouraging workers to be 'natural' rather than 'false' results in workers being locked in a battle of manipulation with customers.

However, the way workers interpret customers is not one-dimensional. Instead three themes were apparent: customers as powerful; customers as pleasurable; and customers as problematic. Workers understand that they need to display subservience to customers as their role often demands that they maintain a subordinate position. Similarly, customers can be the source of frustration for workers in different ways. The typology I developed in chapter five is by no means exhaustive, but makes possible a general analysis of how the workers I studied found customers to be problematic. These 'categories' were based upon how customers can place workers in difficult situations (The 'difficult return' and 'obnoxious twat'), interfere with the productivity of workers (the 'time-waster' and 'rifler') and also infringe upon worker's personal time (the 'last-minute dawdler'). Workers had their own ways of 'dealing' with customers that fell into any (or all) of these categories as I have illustrated. However, customers can also be a source of pleasure and relief for workers. Despite the 'problem customers' many workers derived satisfaction from dealing with the public. This satisfaction was often the result of feeling appreciated by customers, enjoying 'the crack' with people and customers breaking-up monotonous and boring periods. Therefore the interaction between worker and customer can be a fundamental source of pleasure and pride in service work professions as well as a source for conflict.

Chapter five also considered the extent to which employees could resist the service and sales ethic of their employers. Resistance and de-subordination took place in a variety of ways, but these were still constrained by the worker's subordinate position. However, workers do not necessarily stand alone, they form 'tacit alliances' (Mulholland, 2004) with colleagues and 'collective communities of coping' (Korczynski, 2000). Acts of 'de-subordination' (Miliband, 1978), resistance to organisational goals and notions of the 'sovereign consumer' are evident, but they need to be closely observed as they tend to remain hidden or performed in a covert way. Sometimes, the notion of 'good customer service' was used in a perverse way to harass and intimidate customers and on occasion formed the basis of employee resistance to organisational productivity.

### ***Fluidity and 'hidden injuries' of service work***

Chapter six explored the implications of the absence of a clear-cut division between the workplace and 'private lives' of some retail workers. Having an interest in fashion and trends becomes a commodity and resource within the arena of fashion retail. This research follows that of previous authors in highlighting that, for contemporary workers, the boundaries between work and leisure have become increasingly blurred (De Certeau, 1984; Glucksmann, 2005; Bottero, 2005; Pettinger, 2005). While I would agree that the retail workers I studied definitely find it difficult to separate their interests or leisure pursuits from their work lives, retail is a diverse sector. Whereas my research participants may find fashion, appearance and lifestyle a key part of their life

inside and outside of work one can imagine that the same 'blurring' is less likely for staff in 'Pricebeaters'. Accordingly we need to be careful about identifying types of work and 'workplaces' within highly diverse markets and their potential effects on the lives of workers engaged in them.

Looking towards how workers are located within wider social structures is also crucial in exploring the filtering of work and non-work into each other. The social distance approach is a useful tool in exploring these issues as it allows for individuals to be located within local markets of aesthetic exchange (based on status and capital) and takes into account people's life course and trajectory. Consequently this approach helps to understand how particular workers find working in fashion retail (and for certain retailers) enjoyable or can derive status and attach cultural value to work that others may find boring, demeaning and poorly paid.

Attention focused on the sociability of employees and how this helps to produce the brand strategy and retail space of organizations. This was also seen as having the potential for improving the individual productivity of workers through establishing relationships with customers. Workers express an affinity with their organisations or the kind of work they perform. One of the ways they do so is through their fashion sense. The ability to 'be yourself' was an important element of the work for those at 'Croft' and 'Mojo'. This was expressed through their sociability, but also through stylised identities and attachment to cultural groupings such as 'beautiful' or 'rock' people. These identities also become resources for the workers as they represent local cultural 'cognoscenti'. The

labour involved in 'non-work' activities of workers enhances their credibility and authenticity as 'trendy' or fashionable. Similarly, female workers are able to take advantage of their interaction with male customers through dating and sexual relations. The individual lifestyles of workers thus further illustrate the 'fuzzy boundaries' between work and non-work.

However, workers also feel compelled to continue with their labour performances when they encounter customers while out drinking. This retains the gendered and sexualised elements that distinguish male and female aesthetic labour mentioned in previously. Such encounters can be enjoyable for workers but they can also be stressful and cause anxiety. The threat of physical and sexual violence was a real issue for these workers as they felt their occupation placed them at higher risk. Such perceptions and invasions into the personal lives of workers represent the 'hidden injuries' of service work. The extent of these 'injuries' varied, as workers found their stylised identities (e.g. as 'beautiful', 'trendy', 'rock' or 'emo' people) both enabled and challenged. In addition, the shift patterns involved in retail work led to workers feeling resentful, frustrated and stressed at having to work when others are out enjoying themselves. Similarly, the long hours can take their toll on the health and wellbeing of individual workers as they become 'run-down' and 'depressed' by the restrictions and pressure that their shift patterns place upon their social lives. This is a cause for concern as some workers perceive that their health and wellbeing are negatively affected by their occupation. However, in the vast majority of cases, workers *do* enjoy themselves at work drawing support from

colleagues and enjoying the privileges and benefits that they receive as a result of their job.

Having revisited the arguments made in the chapters the following section will briefly reflect upon certain areas that I feel were not explored fully in the thesis and possible avenues for future research.

### ***'Preview collection': Avenues for further exploration***

The aim of this project was to explore the gendered aesthetics of retail work. Having done this, I feel that a number of other issues have presented themselves which warrant further interest. Primarily I will underline the issues that I have touched upon and that require further elaboration before considering areas that could be used to supplement these findings and explore alternative fields

This project has looked at the specificities of particular fashion retailers, however, as the retail sector is not homogenous I think it would be beneficial to consider alternative retail environments. We need to examine whether the same findings would be true from a wider range of shops and concessions. Does aesthetic labour remain gendered and sexualised in similar/alternative ways in department stores, perfume and makeup counters, high-end designer boutiques and budget retailers? Do work and non-work activities filter into each other for those employed in these areas? Similarly, we need to see greater investigation of pro-active sales environments (such as car, cosmetic, and technology



retailers) to further establish the impact this has upon workers and how far they sell their identities as part of the product.

I think it would also be interesting to track the trajectories of those who enter and leave retail. Do they remain in similar sectors or advance/fall into alternative ones. Although many of the workers in this study were involved in higher/further education and in most cases leave retail at certain junctures, full-time staff follow an alternative trajectory. It would be useful to examine the high turnover of staff in retail and individuals' horizontal and vertical movement between shops/sectors or move out of retail altogether.

Another area that I think would be fruitful to explore that has been highlighted in this research is the social relations among women. Many of the female workers in this study spoke about other women in fairly antagonistic terms. The female workers I spoke to and observed characterised working on ladieswear as 'bitchy' and 'catty' and described female customers using the same terms. This was despite the fact that they had many (and mainly) female friends. When asked about this, many of the female workers spoke of the terms 'women' and 'bitchy' as if the former presupposed the latter. Yet they failed to accept that although they characterised other women as 'bitches', their close friends and themselves seemed excluded from this. This characterisation was also echoed in management attempts to maintain a 'well-balanced' workforce as having too many female workers was seen as the route to bitchiness and in-fighting. This was despite the fact that many of the male workers engaged in the practice of 'bitching' and in some cases were seen as being 'worse bitches' than their

female colleagues. It would be interesting to find out how the practice of 'bitching' is gendered, why men are so often excluded from being a 'bitch' (although, gay men may also be drawn into this category as a result of their proximate position to 'the feminine'), and how this shapes social relations among women.

Further research would also be beneficial into the field of age, aesthetics and employment. Important findings could be explored by analysing the experiences of aesthetic labourers in terms of age - by looking at younger workers and the 'aged' or 'aging' aesthetic labourer. What are the experiences of 'older' aesthetic labourers? Do they have the same investments and attach similar or different cultural and personal value to this kind of work as their younger counterparts?

Finally, and perhaps the key area that I think demands further investigation, is the experiences that customers have of the aesthetic labour of retail employees. I think this is an important area to analyse because it would be useful to consider how far customers acknowledge or 'buy into' the intangible aspects of the commodities they purchase. How far are customers aware that they are purchasing more than the clothing or products on offer? How far do they play along with, dismiss or accept the aesthetic labour performances of workers and does this affect their purchase decisions and shopping behaviour? Furthermore, how do they perceive and make sense of situations when they encounter workers that they recognise out in public, away from the store? What are the investments customers make and take advantage of through forming

relationships or in becoming 'regulars' with sales staff? These issues highlight the potential for future research in this area.

Undertaking such research would build upon the work presented here in terms of the gendered aesthetics of retail workers. I have shown that gender and sexuality remain influential in structuring the work-based experiences of service workers and how the 'product' being sold incorporates the identities of workers. The continuation of traditional ideas regarding gendered attributes, skills and abilities needs to remain high on the agenda for social researchers.

In addition, I have considered the similarities and differences in approaches to 'customer service' and how this impacted upon the type of labour required of employees. The heavy surveillance to which employees and their labour performances are subjected continues to restrict their strategies for resistance/de-subordination. However, it has been demonstrated that workers find covert ways and forge 'tacit alliances' to transform/resist their subordination or maintain some level of control over their labour and presentation of self.

Also, and I think this is crucial to our understanding of 'work', we need to examine precisely how far 'work' filters into other spheres of life. Clearly, some workers find themselves 'open all hours' by the nature of their occupations. Although for many this can be a source of pleasure, cultural value and status, 'hidden injuries' can also be inflicted as a consequence of aesthetic labour becoming 'mobile' and moving between spheres. Greater attention must be focused upon the 'mobility' of 'work' and whether employees in alternative

occupations have similar/different experiences. Only after such explorations will we have the ability to fully appreciate the nature of the social relations of work and employment in contemporary society.

## **APPENDIX A: Fieldwork retrospective**

Table showing time spent at each retailer (in days) per month.

Month	Retailer		
	'Mojo'	'Croft'	'Legend'
October 2004	5 days manager liaison and preliminary investigation	7 days manager liaison and preliminary investigation	6 days manager liaison and preliminary investigation
November 2004	20 day Participant observation period; 5 Interviews with staff		1 day as staff cover
December 2004	4 Interviews with staff; 8 days as staff cover	4 days as staff cover	5 days as staff cover
January 2005	1 day staff cover	20 day participant observation period; 6 interviews with staff	1 day as staff cover
February 2005	1 day as staff cover	1 day as staff cover; 3 interviews with staff	20 day participant observation period; 1 interview with staff
March 2005	5 days as staff cover	7 days as staff cover	7 Interviews with staff; 2 days as cover
Total number of days/interviews	40 days/9 interviews	39 days/9 interviews	35 days/8 interviews

## **Appendix B: Interview Questions**

- Have you worked in the retail sector before or any other kind of service industry? Where/what kind?
- How important do you think experience of this type of work is?
- How important do you think looks/appearance are for working in retail/this shop?
- Do you think you use your looks and/or other skills to your advantage? In gaining employment and in the work you do? How would you say you do/don't do this? Give examples.
- Do you think anyone can do this kind of work?
- What characteristics do you think you need? Where do you think you fit according to this definition?
- What makes a successful sales assistant?
- How would you define good customer service?
- Do managers ever attempt to control your work or carry out any form of surveillance of your work?
- What do you think of customers?
- How much power do you think customers have in this environment?
- Do you enjoy serving people?
- Are customers ever a problem?
- Do you find it difficult/easy being friendly towards customers all of the time?
- What attracted you to this kind of work/retailer?
- Did you have any expectations – were these correct? In what ways is it different from what you expected?

- Do you have any career plans? Where do you see yourself in five years?
- How would you define your own identity? How would you define yourself?  
Describe your personality and interests. Did this influence your decision to enter this kind of work/retailer?
- In what ways, if any, is your behaviour/personality different at work compared to outside of work?
- What do you dislike about this kind of work?
- Do you like the clothes you sell? How would you describe your own sense of style? Do you buy the clothes the company sells?
- Have you changed at all, as a person or in your tastes, as a result of working for your shop?
- Is there anything that you 'get away with' at work? Do you ever waste time? If so in what ways? If not, why not?
- Have you ever broken company policies without management finding out?
- How do you deal with difficult customers/situations?
- What are the stores uniform requirements and guidelines for appearance? What do you think of them? Why?
- Is it easy or difficult to follow these guidelines?
- Why do you think the store has these guidelines?
- Do you see them as a necessary or unnecessary part of the work involved?
- Do you think this work is different in any way for men and women? Explain.
- Are there any aspects of the work where you think being a man/woman is an advantage? Can you think of any examples/situations?
- Can you think of any differences/similarities in the way men/women workers perform this job?

- Do customers interact in the same or different way towards male/female staff?
- Do you think expectations over appearance are applied equally for male and female workers?
- Do you think men and women use their looks and appearance to gain employment in this kind of work? How and is it different or the same for men and women?
- Do you think there is any stigma attached to being a man/woman in this kind of work?
- Have customers ever recognised you outside of work? Where and when? How often? Do you recognise them? What happens in these situations?
- How do you feel about these situations if they do occur? Is it a good thing or a problem?
- How do you interact with customers and what techniques of persuasion do you use to influence them?
- Have you ever felt you have been sexually harassed or seen a colleague be sexually harassed on the shopfloor? If so what happened?



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